A LOVER OF TRUTH

BY ELIZA ORNE WHITE

O. P. Leuht to R. R. L. 9/26/32

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HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN & CO.
BOSTON AND NEW YORK.

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BY

ELIZA ORNE WHITE

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge
1900

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TO

E. D. H.

A LOVER OF TRUTH

I

When Jean Reycroft was a little girl, she was usually characterized by her elders as "a very good child." Now there is nothing more disheartening at any age than to be known solely by our virtues, but it is particularly depressing when we are young. What she would have liked people to say was, "Jean Reycroft is so pretty, and very fascinating and charming!" In point of fact, she was not any of these things, and alas! she knew it only too well. Interesting she was, but at the age of ten her interesting qualities had not worked from the inside to the surface sufficiently to be apparent except to her family. When a little girl sits silent for hours in a merry company, she might as well be without brains, so far as her contribution to society is concerned.

Jean had another claim to distinction, namely, her family connection. When it was said of her that she was a very good child, some one was

sure to add that she was pretty little Elsie Thorndyke's cousin, or else that she was half sister to that sweet Helen Gordon, impossible as it seemed, for there never were two sisters more unlike; and to wind up with, it was stated that she was dear old Mr. Thorndyke's grand-daughter. The advantages in being well born are obvious, but there are some less conspicuous disadvantages, and if one is the shy member of an unusually delightful family, that same domestic circle sometimes proves a heavy handicap.

"She is a good child," they said of Jean, "but what a pity that she has n't any of the Thorndyke charm! She is an out and out Reycroft!"

Jean did not like to be an out and out Reycroft, for her uncle, the doctor, and the only living member of her father's family, was not a person to inspire a shy child with a love for the Reycroft name. He had started in life as diffident and self-centred as his little niece; but now that he had reached middle age and become an important member of the community, he was no longer called reserved, but brusque, sarcastic, or indifferent. It must be added that he had the Reycroft virtues as well as their faults, and was besides such an excellent physician that his patients, although often glad they were not called upon to live with him, were equally sure they could not live without him.

On this especial afternoon Jean was curled up on a sofa in the bow window of her grandfather's study, writing a poem called "The Death Angel," for which she had first drawn an illustration; and as poetry did not come as easily to her as drawing, she was counting out the syllables on her small fingers.

> Mary will die, Mary will die;
> And we hear the death angel cry,
> Come to your grave, sweet Mary.

She was much pleased with these lines. The next stanza gave her more trouble.

> Mary has died, Mary has died;
> And life and death have — (What did rhyme with died?)
> To see which will gain the prize.

"Sarah," she asked, looking up as a sad-faced maid entered the room, "what rhymes with 'died'?"

Sarah was a person with literary tendencies, and she read Jean's unfinished effort with flattering interest.

"It is beautiful," she remarked. "And such a lovely picture. You will surely be a great artist when you grow up, Miss Jean. I should say 'vied,' 'life and death have vied to see which will gain the prize.' But you know you are going to George Morley's birthday party this afternoon, and it's time you changed your dress."

Jean abhorred parties, but she was too proud to confide the fact, even to the sympathetic Sarah. Indeed, the poor child had spent her life so far in conscientiously trying to like whatever other people liked. She obediently put away her paper and pencil and followed Sarah upstairs.

"I wish I was a little girl," said the maid, with a sigh, as she brushed Jean's straight dark hair. "I wish I was going to a nice party, in a white gown with a pink sash. Pink is so becoming when one has dark brown eyes like you, Miss Jean. Oh, the innocence, the delight of childhood!"

Jean made no reply. Silence was always her chief weapon of defense. What she thought was: "It's perfectly horrid to be a little girl. I'm just crazy to be grown up. Sometimes I think I'd like to be dead, but generally I'd rather try being grown up first, for if you are dead you can never come back and be grown up, even if you want to ever so much."

When she was finally arrayed in her white gown and pink sash, she went demurely downstairs to show herself to her grown-up half-sister Helen, who was making a salad in the dining-room. Helen looked up with such a bright smile that she was fairly radiant. Her happy expression made one forget that there was no-

thing else beautiful about her face except its frame of red gold hair. Perhaps it was this that helped to complete the impression of warmth and comfortable cheer that one always felt when brought in contact with her even for a moment.

"Well, dear," she said in a contralto voice that was as warm as herself, "how nice you look! I hope you 'll have a delightful time!"

There was nothing to suggest such a possibility in the shrinking little figure with the melancholy dark eyes.

"I suppose it will be very pleasant," said Jean in resigned tones.

"Come out into the garden, and we 'll pick some lilies of the valley for you to take to George," said Helen.

Jean followed her sister, too shy to protest, but overwhelmed at the prospect of having to give a birthday present to George Morley.

In the garden she forgot for a moment her pangs of anticipation, for the air was so sweet, and the shadows on the lawn so full of mystery. Everything spoke of the spring. Robins and bluebirds sang of it, doves cooed of it, trees and shrubs alike seemed filled with new life, while the white bells of the lilies of the valley in their cool green nest gave forth a fragrance that seemed the essence of the season.

"Oh, dear, how I wish I could stay here," thought poor Jean, "instead of having to go to a hateful party, and give flowers to a dreadful boy."

Helen, meanwhile, was putting the finishing touches to her bouquet.

"Are n't they lovely?" she asked, as she added the last lily of the valley and gave the flowers to her sister. "And now good-by, dear. Have a nice time, and give my love to Mrs. Morley and Virginia and George. I hope they won't play any kissing games, for I don't like them."

Jean started down the quiet village street with the lilies of the valley clutched in her hand. How could she ever get the courage to hand them to George Morley? she asked herself. When she reached the gate of the Morleys' house, with its stone lions on either side, her fears redoubled. It would be so easy to hide the flowers down by the stone wall, and to tell Helen that she had dropped them. Would n't it be true in a way? But no, it would be the same as a lie. She raised the ponderous knocker and gave a timid rap. A man in livery opened the door, and this formidable person inspired Jean with new terrors. She hurried past him; but when she saw the parlor already full of children she longed to rush upstairs and hide

herself somewhere in the unexplored rooms. It was too late. Virginia Morley, a fine-looking, dark-haired girl of Helen's age, in a flame-colored gown, came out to give her a cordial handshake. She was a wholesome, breezy young person, and under her escort Jean's fears somewhat subsided.

"Give me your hat," said Virginia, "and come right in here. You are just in time for Copenhagen. What lovely lilies of the valley!"

Jean gave a hurried glance around the parlor, and saw that the terrifying George was on the other side of it. The ordeal was too severe.

"I brought them — I brought them for you," she stammered. "Helen picked them. They are the first we 've had."

"How good of you to give them to me! They are lovely, and look so well with my gown. Thank you ever so much."

Jean had a guilty feeling when she joined the Copenhagen ring, for although her sister had not forbidden her to play, she had expressed her disapproval of kissing games; but she was too timid and conventional a little girl to refuse when she was in Rome to do as the Romans do. She merely followed their lead in so depressed a fashion as to lose all chance of pleasure for herself; and as she stood with her hands on the Copenhagen rope she was the embodiment of

misery. There was something in the atmosphere of the very room itself that depressed her, for although the house was the most pretentious one in the village, the Morleys were a plebeian family and their taste had not kept pace with their fortunes. The marble-topped tables with their gilt legs, the bright-hued flowery carpet, the ugly statues, and the pictures in their tawdry frames gave her beauty-loving eyes a vague pain. She did not quite know what was the matter with this room, which frightened her by its magnificence, but she was aware that it made her uncomfortable. She turned to look at her gay little cousin Elsie, who was running about with her yellow hair flying, and her mischievous eyes glancing back at George Morley, who was in hot pursuit of her. "I should die if any one tried to kiss me," thought Jean. "I hope they won't. Oh, how I hope they won't!"

Then as time wore on she saw that she need not be afraid, for no boy had the faintest idea of kissing her. She stood with her hands on the rope, as little noticed as if she had been invisible. Finally a lump rose in her throat. "It is n't that I want to be kissed," she said to herself, "I should hate it; but I don't like to be the kind of little girl that nobody wants to kiss!"

Her eyes rested on Alan Nichols at this point.

He was the oldest and by far the handsomest boy in the room, and Jean for some time had cherished a secret admiration for him. He had never spoken to her but once, but that occasion was indelibly engraved upon her memory. The wonderful conversation had taken place at a church fair, where she had become the possessor, through the medium of the fish-pond, of a little walnut, gummed together and containing some trinket. On this memorable afternoon Alan, who was standing near her, had said, "Jean, shan't I open your walnut for you?"

She had been too shy to answer him, and had given him the walnut silently, and with it had gone her wondering gratitude, her belief that this kind lad with the dark eyes and the firm mouth was a being wholly superior to the usual race of boys. He opened the walnut with his penknife, releasing a cornelian ring, and then, to her tremulous satisfaction, he slipped it on her third finger.

"It is just a fit," he observed.

Jean was wearing the ring now. She meant to wear it always. A moment later, as she saw Alan stoop and kiss her pretty cousin, something seemed to clutch at her heart.

"I don't see why everybody was n't made with golden hair and blue eyes," she thought.

A game of "Button button, who has the

button?" followed Copenhagen, despite Alan's exclamation that it was only fit for babies. They had a merry time over it, however, notwithstanding his disapproval, until Alan himself was questioned.

"Button button, who has the button?" George Morley asked him.

"I have. I'm not going to lie for an old game."

The children were electrified. Jean felt her heart swell with pride in her hero, but Elsie said, "How mean of you, Alan Nichols! You've spoiled all our fun."

"I wonder if Alan would like Elsie just the same if he knew she told lies," thought Jean. "She whispers at school sometimes, and then gives in her report, 'not whispered.' If I told lies I should be very uncomfortable, but she doesn't seem to mind it. I wish I were like Elsie, — oh, dear!"

Jean's grandfather called to take her home before the party was over. Now strange to say, although the little girl had had a wretched time from the moment she entered the house, she did not want to leave before the others. And yet, when her grandfather said in his kind voice, "Jean, are you ready?" she replied meekly, "Yes, grandpapa."

He had promised to see his grand-daughter

Elsie home too, as she lived not far from Jean and himself, and when he asked her if she were ready she answered: "No, indeed. I always stay until parties are done. Sit down, grandpapa, dear. You may as well make the best of it."

Mr. Thorndyke laughingly obeyed, and Jean wished again that she were like Elsie.

As they were walking home, the two cousins ran on ahead of their grandfather and discussed the evening.

"I had a lovely time, didn't you, Jean?" Elsie asked.

"Yes, I had a very nice time."

Oddly enough, it did not occur to her to wonder whether the truthful Alan Nichols would approve of her as she made this speech.

"Only Copenhagen is such a silly game!" and Elsie gave her head a toss. "Boys do say such things to you! Don't you hate boys when they are silly?"

"I hate boys, but they never say anything to me, sensible or silly."

"How funny! I suppose they are afraid of you. Well, it saves you a lot of trouble. I do so hate to be kissed, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Jean," Elsie continued presently, "do you ever look in the glass and say to yourself, 'How pretty I am'?"

"No," Jean said vehemently, "but I often look in the glass and say, 'How ugly I am.'"

"You are not ugly. You have lovely eyes. You'd be a pretty girl if you did not look all the time as if you were going to a funeral."

They parted at Elsie's door with a kiss and an appointment to meet the next day in the old garden behind Mr. Thorndyke's house; for although Jean had moments of hating her cousin, she could never live for more than twenty-four hours without her.

When Jean and her grandfather reached home, Helen was sitting in the parlor reading. The little girl felt a thrill of happiness. For the moment her trials were forgotten. Her sensitive nature was as quick to respond to pleasurable sensations as to unhappy ones, and the harmonious colors of the parlor, and Helen, in her lilac gown, a bright, radiant figure in the lamplight, gave her keen enjoyment. "Oh, how nice it is to get home!" she said.

"Didn't you have a good time, dear?" her sister asked.

"Yes, a very good time."

"Tell me all about it."

"There was delicious vanilla ice-cream for supper, and lovely macaroons and cocoanut cakes, and cold tongue and ham and bread and butter."

"Whom did you sit by?"

"Tom Carter was on one side of me, and" —hesitating a little— "Alan Nichols on the other."

"What did you talk about?"

"I didn't talk. I ate my supper. Alan talked to Elsie, and Tom didn't talk to anybody."

It did not sound a very brilliant affair as Jean described it, and Helen could only hope that her small sister was one of those persons who demand little. At last Jean reached the game of Copenhagen in her description. "Would you have liked it better if I hadn't played, Helen?" she inquired anxiously.

"No, dear. That would have seemed like criticising Mrs. Morley and Virginia."

"Nobody kissed me," said Jean, feeling that she was in some way bound to divulge this fact. "So of course it was just the same as if I hadn't played," she added carelessly.

Helen was unusually sympathetic, but she went upstairs with her sister without any idea of the misery she had suffered. Her own temperament was such a happy one that she could not comprehend Jean's cast of mind.

After Helen left her, the little girl lay awake reviewing her past life. Unfortunately, this is sometimes as harrowing an occupation at ten as

at thirty or sixty, although we grown-up people are apt to forget the fact. There ought to be some consolation in the thought that at ten one has not a very long past to review, but this did not occur to Jean. She said to herself, "I am the kind of little girl that boys hate. I hate boys." A pause. "When I grow up, I shall never marry. I shall be an old maid; it is much nicer." Another pause. "Nobody will want to marry me, so I shall *have* to be an old maid, anyway." Here Jean smiled, for happily she was not without humor. "I'm going to be an artist when I grow up, as nobody will want to marry me. I shall be a very great artist, and Alan Nichols will admire my pictures. He will say, 'Is it possible that these beautiful works of art were painted by that little girl who was so unattractive that nobody wanted to kiss her?' Oh, dear, I'm not the sort of little girl that boys and men like! Everybody always cares more for Helen and Elsie than for me." Hard as it was, she could bear to have her sister liked best, for Helen was so good; but it did seem unfair that they should prefer a little girl who told lies to one who told the truth. It was at this point that her thoughts went back to the past.

She recalled a certain afternoon ages ago, when her uncle, Dr. Reycroft, had come on to

New York to her mother's funeral. She had a quick remembrance of the desolation that had swept over her as she realized that besides losing her dear mamma, she and Helen were to go away from all their familiar surroundings to live in Edgecomb with their grandfather. Then there had come a knock on the door, and the maid told them that Dr. Reycroft had arrived. Helen, who was making the final arrangements with her grandfather, sent Jean down to him.

"He will like to see you best, dear," she said. "You know he is your own uncle, and he is n't any relation to me."

Jean descended the stairs with a beating heart, and paused in the doorway. Her uncle was reading a newspaper, and did not see her. She took a few more timid steps and he looked up. He was a small, slightly built man, with a plain face and penetrating dark eyes that seemed to the poor child to look through her to the wall beyond, and to find nothing in either to interest him.

"This is Jean, I suppose?" he asked, in a voice that tried to be kind.

"Yes, sir."

He went over to the sofa and motioned to her to take a seat by his side.

"How old are you?" he inquired presently.

She could not remember, for she was so frightened.

"I asked how old you were," he repeated.

"Seven."

"Speak louder. I can't hear a word you say."

"Seven. Seven and a quarter."

"I'm glad you put in the quarter," he said, with a friendly smile that softened his expression. "It is well to be exact. You are large for your age, and you have the Reycroft cordiality and ease of manner. It's a shame to put such a little thing into that confounded black."

Jean shrank into a corner, as if to hide herself from further comments. It did not occur to her that a grown-up man could feel as ill at ease as a small child, or that she could do anything to mitigate the situation, so she sat with her eyes on the rug, preserving an unbroken silence. Finally to her unspeakable relief the door opened and Helen appeared.

Helen was only sixteen, but she was very womanly and self-possessed. Dr. Reycroft glanced up indifferently as she entered, but his attention was quickly riveted. It was as if a flash of sunlight had come into the sombre room, for she looked a bright picture of girlhood, even now in her sorrow. Her long braids of red gold hair relieved the gloomy effect of her black gown, and the musical tones of her voice brought a welcome with them.

She came straight up to him and held out her hand.

"I'm so glad you have come," she said cordially. "I have heard about you all my life. May I call you Uncle James, as Jean does, even if you are not really my uncle?"

Dr. Reycroft quickly thawed, under Helen's genial influence, while Jean experienced her first pangs of jealousy. He was her uncle, this grave man with the dark eyes that made her think of those of her dead father. He ought to love her dearly, and instead of that he liked Helen best, Helen who was not his niece at all. Then Jean recalled the sad journey with her grandfather and uncle, and her first sensations when she reached Edgecomb in the darkness. There had been a few moments' delay in the stuffy little station, and then she and Helen and their grandfather seated themselves in the dilapidated village hack and were driven slowly up the street. She remembered the chilly air and the falling snow, and her first hurried impression of a village of white houses and two friendly church spires. They had stopped before the gate of a white house larger than the others, while the lights flashed out and the servants welcomed them, and then came warmth and peace. When Jean reached this point in her reflections she skipped over the first uneventful, happy year that she and Helen spent with their grandfather, to a certain afternoon in the old garden when

her cousin, Dick Johnstone was alive. He had been petting Elsie and calling her his little wife, until Jean felt that she could bear it no longer; and when Elsie at length went home, Jean ran into the summer-house and climbed into his lap.

"I will be your little wife now, Cousin Dick," she stated shyly.

He rose in a bored way and said, "A man can't have but one wife."

Poor Jean, repulsed and humiliated, went quietly away without another word, suffering as keenly as if she had been a woman, and with less hope, for the knowledge of herself had come for the first time. Before that afternoon she had felt that she was one of the most important persons in the universe, and afterwards she knew she was a plain, unattractive, stupid little girl.

And now here was the same thing over again! She liked Alan Nichols in the same shy, intense, speechless fashion in which she had previously worshiped her cousin Dick, and he was devoted to Elsie and never gave a thought to her. How like a hero he had looked when he flung back his head and dared to speak the truth! She could recall the very tones in which he said, "I have it; I am not going to lie about an old game." How different he was from George Morley, who had passed the button to her and

then declared that Alan Nichols had it! And Elsie could not appreciate Alan's courage; she merely thought he had spoiled the game!

Jean was wide awake when her sister came to bed, lying in that tearless misery which is the portion of such sensitively organized children. She closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep.

"Oh, dear!" she thought, "I wish I were not such an unattractive little girl! I wish people could be born grown up."

II

Jean Reycroft at fourteen was much the same inwardly that she had been at ten. Outwardly she was less attractive, for she had grown very tall and was conscious of her hands and feet. A close observer would have noticed that she was not without beauty, although it was as yet undeveloped, and would have suspected that she had interesting traits; but such observers are rare, and to the world in general she was merely an overgrown, painfully shy girl. She was still subject to the same fluctuations of feeling, varying from intense happiness to abject misery, and although she had passed beyond the period of kissing-games, she had discovered that dancing-school, under some circumstances, can be a far more agonizing ordeal.

"Jean," said her sister one night, as she was escorting her to this form of torture, "you've improved wonderfully in your waltzing since you have practiced at home with me. All you want is confidence. Do try to look happy, and don't forget you must talk a little. You stood

all through the lancers the other night without saying a word to Alan Nichols."

"He did n't say anything to me. He was watching Elsie. He only danced with me from a sense of duty. He is always good to the wall flowers on principle."

"My dear, you must not take people's motives for granted. He probably wanted to dance with you."

"I hate dancing-school!" exclaimed Jean. She had grown a little less reserved in the four years.

"It is hard for me to understand it, for I liked it so much."

"Of course you did," and Jean glanced admiringly at her graceful sister. "You like everything, Helen; you were born in tune."

It was then that Helen gave Jean the advice that all unselfish unconscious women are sure to give, sooner or later, to their self-centred self-conscious, relatives.

"If you were only to forget yourself, dear," she suggested: "and think about other people, you would find it made an immense difference."

Jean, as usual, took refuge in silence. What she thought was, "It is easy to say that, if you are like Helen, but it is not easy to do it if you are so shy that all the words you want to say suddenly go out of your head, and you can't

remember the figures in the square dances to save your soul unless you keep your mind on them every single minute. If I were to think about other people, I should get so hopelessly mixed that I should tangle up the whole set in the lancers."

Jean's silence encouraged Helen to proceed. "If Alan asks you to dance to-night, try to make him talk. He can be very interesting. All he needs is to be drawn out."

As Jean took off her wraps in the dressing-room, she nodded in a shy, uncomfortable fashion to the girls she knew slightly, and then turned to greet cordially her three or four friends. She was a favorite in a quiet way with the girls she liked, while those whom she did not like called her "stuck up."

Elsie was looking particularly bewitching in a pale blue gown trimmed with swan's down. She was chattering to one of her girl friends, but she let her eyes wander through the open door to the group of lads who were standing in a corner in the dancing-hall. More than one pair of eyes rested with boyish admiration on the little figure in pale blue, framed in the doorway.

"Oh, dear! How I wish I were like Elsie!" Jean thought for the hundredth time.

A few minutes later the girls were all sitting

on the wooden settees in the hall, waiting for the music to strike up. Elsie and Jean were side by side. Elsie's face was bright with happiness, her blue eyes sparkled, and there was a lovely color in her cheeks. As the strains of a Strauss waltz sounded from the piano, she tapped the floor softly with one diminutive bronze-clad foot. Everything about her, from her smiling face to her dainty little figure, breathed eager invitation. Jean sat with her eyes cast on the floor. Her attitude was one of hopeless misery. She seemed conscious of the awkward lines of her slim figure, and of the size of her bronzed slippers, that made Elsie's feet look like those of a little child. There was a stand-off air about her that said as plainly as if it were written all over her in large characters, —

"Who dances with me does so at his peril, for I waltz badly, and oh, how I hate it!"

The boys came racing across the floor to secure their favorite partners. Elsie was at once led off by the pleasant-faced George Morley, the best dancer in the school, while Alan, who had wanted Elsie too, was obliged to content himself with Susie Endicott. The other girls were appropriated in due season one by one. It at last became apparent to the suffering Jean that there was an extra girl present, and that

this left-over person was to be herself. Her cheeks grew redder and redder, and she wished she could borrow an invisible cloak. They had all begun to dance, and she felt as if the eyes of every one in the room were fastened on her and that they were all thinking, "Jean Reycroft has n't a partner. Poor girl, it 's a pity she waltzes so badly."

Presently Virginia Morley, who had joined the ranks of the spectators, good naturedly crossed over and asked Jean if she would not like to waltz with her. Jean had always secretly despised her, because she had a loud voice and laugh, and did not belong to an aristocratic family, but she was touchingly grateful at the present moment for attention even from this quarter.

"You 've improved," Virginia said encouragingly, when their dance was over; "all you need is practice. Reversing seems to stick you a little. If you 'll come up some afternoon, I 'll play for you and get George to waltz with you."

Jean shuddered at this awful prospect and hastened to reply, —

"You are very kind, but Helen is teaching me all I have time for."

"As you like," said Virginia stiffly; and she added to herself, "George is right; she is 'stuck up.' "

When it was time for the lancers, Jean's dejected figure took on a more hopeful pose, for she had mastered the intricacies of this dance. Her heart began to beat quickly, for Alan Nichols was approaching. She was so afraid he would think she liked to dance with him, that she put on her most severe expression, and looked away from him to the farther end of the room. He stood before her a little dampened by her chilling reception, and looked irresolutely towards Susie Endicott. Jean had a pang of keen disappointment, fearing that after all he was not going to ask her to dance.

"Jean, will you dance the lancers with me?"

There could be no mistake. The bare room at once seemed a palace, the wooden settee where she had been sitting became a regal throne, the cracked piano was a whole orchestra, the flaring gas jets threw a dazzling light, and she was so happy that she could willingly have lived through a hundred mortifying experiences for the sake of such a blissful moment. She followed her partner silently across the hall in a dream of delight, and they took their places as side couple in a set opposite Elsie and George Morley.

"Oh, dear, if I could only do as Helen says and make him talk!" thought poor Jean, but

it seemed impossible to begin. It was too trite to remark that it was a pleasant evening, for Alan was an intellectual boy who would scorn such threadbare themes. Suddenly she thought of school, and of the one class in which they were fellow pupils.

"Do you like French?" she inquired in a low tone.

"I beg your pardon."

"Do you like French?" she repeated in a melancholy voice.

"Not at all."

This was somewhat disheartening.

"Do you like Greek?" she continued desperately.

"Very much."

She caught her sister's eyes fixed on her in an encouraging manner. "Go on," Helen seemed to say, "you are doing bravely."

This was too much for Jean's gravity. She laughed nervously and looked down at her slippers.

"Come on, Jean," said Elsie; "don't be a slow-poke. It 's your turn to dance now."

Jean was one of those persons of New England descent who, if they once embark upon a line of conduct that they feel prescribed by duty, pursue it unflinchingly. She had undertaken to talk to Alan Nichols, and talk she

would, even if he and she were more uncomfortable in the process than if they had maintained an unsociable but at least restful silence.

"I've never studied Greek," she went on in the next pause in the dance. "I don't think I should like it. American history is my favorite study."

"I like it too," said Alan, brightening visibly.

"How handsome he is," thought Jean, "and how manly. It seems funny I should be in a French class with him, when he is so old — eighteen, and going to college next year. I wish it were as easy to learn to dance as it is to learn French."

"How far have you gone in American History?" Alan inquired presently.

"We've just had the Signing of the Declaration of Independence. It is all so interesting, especially the part about Benjamin Franklin amusing" — suddenly the name of Thomas Jefferson went as completely out of her head as if he had never had one.

"Roger Sherman?" her companion suggested.

"No."

"Robert Livingston?"

"No," she said, while her cheeks were getting hotter and hotter.

"You don't mean Adams or Jefferson?"

"Yes, I mean Jefferson. Franklin told him a very funny story about a hatter."

"What was it?"

She tried to think. She had remembered it perfectly a moment before, but now it had vanished along the same road that Thomas Jefferson had traveled.

"I forget what it was," said poor Jean, "but it was very funny."

"Jean, for heaven's sake come and cross right hands," Elsie cried impatiently.

"He will never, never dance with me again," Jean said to herself. "He will think me a perfect fool. As long as you don't open your lips there is the chance that you could speak if you chose, but if you talk and make an idiot of yourself there is no hope for you."

And so ended her first attempt to draw out Alan Nichols.

Jean's grandfather, the Rev. Edward Thorndyke, was an Orthodox clergyman of a liberal stripe. He was one of those fortunate men born with charm, and was loved for his attractions even more than for his goodness. Mr. Thorndyke was superintendent of his Sunday-school, and was on intimate terms with every child. He had a class of the older boys, who were made welcome to his study at all hours.

Whenever they chanced to avail themselves of the privilege, Jean always hurried up the back stairs, that she might escape the trial of speaking to them.

One winter day, not long after her unlucky experiment in conversation, she was curled up in the study window-seat, absorbed in "Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde," when she heard a ring at the door.

She instantly fled to the top of the staircase.

"Is Mr. Thorndyke in?" asked a voice that set her heart beating quickly.

"No."

"Is Miss Helen in?" inquired a second voice to which she was indifferent.

"No, but Miss Jean is."

Jean did not wait to hear anything further, but retreated precipitately to her own room. The bare idea of having an interview with Alan Nichols and George Morley was paralyzing. She heard Sarah coming upstairs. What should she do? At first, escape seemed impossible. As the maid came nearer and nearer, Jean grew more and more desperate. Finally a bright idea struck her, and she hastily shut herself into her closet. It was a very small closet, and life was not especially agreeable there, but anything was better than having to speak to those terrifying boys.

"Miss Jean!" Sarah called, "Miss Jean! where are you?"

Then after a time she heard the door close and the sound of descending footsteps. When Jean was sure that her enemies had departed, she came cautiously forth and looked stealthily out of her window, to see if they were walking down the street, for even a brief glimpse of Alan's back, if only it might be seen from a safe distance gave her keen pleasure. No, they were out of sight already. It was so cold in her room that she decided to go down to the warmth below. She had opened the study door and stepped over the threshold before she discovered to her horror that the two boys were comfortably ensconced in front of the fire.

"Good afternoon, Jean," said Alan. "We were waiting for your grandfather, but you will do just as well."

"I beg your pardon, I did n't know you were here," she stammered.

"We came to leave the money for the Children's Mission," Alan explained.

"Grandfather will be in very soon," Jean said in almost inaudible tones. "He has only gone to the post-office."

"Then we will wait for him, but don't let us drive you away," said Alan politely. "Don't mind us."

Not mind them, indeed, when she was trembling all over with fright!

"You are cold," said George kindly. "Come over by the fire."

George Morley was another of those favored beings born with charm, and although Jean had never thought him especially interesting, she could not but feel the attraction of his friendly manners and pleasant, frank smile.

It was easier to slip into a chair than to slip out of the room, and Jean did as he suggested. She opened her book and began to read, but after a time it struck her that this was not polite.

"It is a cold day," she observed in a scared voice. "I think it is going to snow."

"Yes," said Alan, "I think it is."

Now that Jean had once made the fatal plunge, something unexpected happened. In spite of her great fear, there was an awful fascination in sitting in the same room with Alan Nichols. She was exhilarated, miserable as she was. She glanced furtively from time to time at his fine figure and at his handsome face, with its clear-cut features, the strong mouth, and somewhat aggressive chin, the straight nose, and the dark eyes that seemed so full of expression, and the more she looked at him the more conscious she was of a feeling of helpless attraction.

"How are you getting on with American history?" he asked her presently, with a half-amused, half-ironical smile.

"Very well. I think Washington was perfectly fine."

"A good many other people have thought so too."

"I hate Alan Nichols," she said to herself; "he is very disagreeable."

"I could never see why everybody made such a time about that old cherry-tree," said George, coming to her rescue.

"I never could either," she agreed. "It is almost impossible to tell a direct lie about a thing like that, if you are at all truthful."

"Yes," George assented, "that is n't the sort of thing a fellow lies about."

Jean was much interested. "What kind of things do boys lie about?" she asked, and then became covered with confusion at her boldness.

"Why, you 'd lie to get another fellow out of a scrape, or you might lie if you were crazy to go fishing and had been told you could n't go. There are lots of different kinds of lies you 'd tell; but it would be easy enough to tell the truth about the cherry-tree."

"Yes," said Jean, "but if anybody had asked George Washington if he liked his father, and his father had been horrid, and he had hated

him, then it would have been brave to tell the truth, because it would have been so hard."

"It would — rather!" George admitted with a chuckle.

"The world would be much better off if we did tell the truth about such things," Alan remarked. "If we hate our families why should n't we say so, instead of mulling along pretending we like them?"

Jean was always interested in a discussion, and forgot her shyness for the moment. Her face lighted up and she looked really beautiful, as she leaned a little forward and her dark eyes became animated. "Do you think it is ever right to tell a lie?" she asked Alan.

"In the abstract I should say never."

"But if you could save a man's life by telling a lie?"

"I think we ought to have faith enough in justice prevailing in the end to tell the truth."

"Well, I know I 'd lie like a blue streak to save a man's life," said George.

Jean had something further that she wanted to ask, but her courage had deserted her. She bent her eyes on the floor and clasped her hands nervously. When she looked down all the light seemed gone out of her face, but there was something interesting still in the shy figure in the dark red gown, sitting in the ruddy firelight,

poised lightly on her chair, as if ready for instant flight. Both Alan and George were conscious of a desire to make her stay.

"Don't you think it is always wrong to tell a lie?" Alan asked her.

"I suppose so," she answered slowly, looking straight at him for one moment with eyes that were like those of a frightened fawn. "But somehow when you say a thing is pretty and you don't think it is pretty, so as not to hurt a person's feelings, or that you've had a good time at a party when you've had a stupid time, it doesn't seem exactly like a lie; it seems like being polite."

"But if you stop to think you will see that it is a lie," persisted Alan, "and if we allow ourselves one kind of lie"—

"Oh, come now, Alan, give us a rest!" said George.

"If we once begin to take the smallest liberty with truth, no one knows where to find us," Alan continued. "It seems to me like this. Coal is always black is n't it?"

"Yes."

"It is just as black whether it is in a big lump or in a fine powder, and so falsehood is falsehood whether the lie is large or small. The little lies are the most dangerous because they are so insidious."

"Perhaps they are," Jean admitted, "but it seems so disagreeable to be always finding fault with things and people."

"If we were all absolutely truthful we should all be in the same box," said Alan, who was as fond of an ethical discussion as Jean herself. "And think how much more piquant and interesting life would be! There would be no glib society lies, no pretending, on the part of families who were quarreling half the time, that they got on well, but a good, wholesome, truthful hatred. 'You don't seem to be very happy with your wife, sir,' somebody would remark, and instead of vowing you adored her, you would have the satisfaction of saying, 'I dislike her very much; she's a selfish, aggravating woman.'"

"Well, I'm glad I'm not your wife, Alan," said George.

At this point Mr. Thorndyke came in, and Jean slipped away, but the conversation was destined to remain with her for many years, helping to mould her character, and increasing her ardent admiration for Alan.

III

Mrs. Shimmin was giving the most brilliant dancing-party of the season, and Jean Reycroft, like little Jack Horner, "sat in a corner," but without the solace of a Christmas pie. Indeed, as she looked back over the many occasions when she had sat in similar corners in Edgecomb, there were very few plums in the retrospect. She had crossed the seas since her childish days, and attained a fair amount of success and happiness in distant lands, but she was learning now that it is well-nigh impossible to outgrow an early reputation in one's native town. The fact that she had studied art for two years in Paris, and had had a picture exhibited in the Salon, was of no avail; and for the moment she seemed to have gone back to her dancing-school days, and become again, in other people's minds, the shy girl who waltzed badly and had nothing to say. The truth was, nevertheless, that her long absence from home had helped her to overcome her self-distrust. She had been forced to think and act for herself. To acquire a calm manner, no matter how frightened or excited she might

be feeling, had been her ambition for years, and she had succeeded so well that she was often considered cold when she was merely shy.

Jean had now been grown up long enough to have the first zest of the experience wear off. She was almost twenty-three, and twenty-three seemed like the old age of girlhood. She could not but admit, however, that life grew more delightful with each added year. One must be a very interesting person to be satisfied long at a time with a life that revolves chiefly around one's self, and most of us are forced in self-defense, if for no other reason, to widen our horizon. Now, as she was suddenly brought face to face with her childhood, she was conscious that at fourteen she had been the central figure in her own landscape, a poor, unsatisfactory figure enough, passionate, eager, intense, yet striving to ignore her half-famished needs, that no one might suspect the untempered material of which she was made. Her world in those days, as she looked back at it with her larger vision, seemed almost too small for breathing space. It was bounded by the wooden fence that shut in the parsonage garden, a charming garden full of flowering almonds, periwinkles, lilies of the valley, roses, peonies, scarlet poppies, and many-colored hollyhocks, with an orchard behind it that was sometimes a fragrant mass of bloom and sometimes a glory of fruit.

When she was seventeen the world had suddenly enlarged its borders and included New York, with its many delights as known to a school-girl. Jean recalled her rapturous joy when she saw the city at night for the first time, with the rows and rows of lights mysteriously stretching away into infinite space. It was then that she had her first glimpse of the true proportion of her life to the lives of others. She remembered saying to her school friend, Susie Endicott, "Is n't it hard to realize that all these houses are full of human beings who feel as necessary to the world as we feel; and who are all carrying an unfinished novel around with them, and just as much interested in their story as we are in ours?"

"What a queer girl you are!" her friend replied, and Jean had subsided.

Susie was gifted by nature with those matter-of-fact qualities that Jean was trying to acquire by art. She was one of the girls whom Jean had envied in the old days. If she could not be pretty and bewitching like Elsie, she would rather be like Susie, with her pleasant face and frank manners, her perfectly commonplace mind, and her happy temperament. Susie made friends everywhere, for all she demanded was a human being who was not too interesting. She did not enjoy original people, finding them unsatisfac-

tory and queer. Even Alan Nichols was too individual to please her.

"She seems to have become reconciled to him now," Jean reflected, as she watched them waltzing together.

Susie was in faultless evening dress, which showed off her pretty neck and arms, and she looked the wholesome, whole-souled girl she was. She glanced up every now and then with a smile at Alan, who towered above her, for Susie was short and rather stout. Jean watched Alan's face with the double interest of the artist and the woman. He was not as handsome as he used to be, but he was still more distinguished looking. He did not have a happy expression, and she could not make out whether he felt himself superior to his company and was taking no pains to conceal the fact, or whether he was unhappy for some serious reason. His face was one that could never fail to interest a student in human nature, for it held out indefinite and baffling promises.

"He might have the grace to ask me to dance once," thought Jean, "but why should I care if he doesn't? He is an aggravating person, and I don't half like him."

Yet whether she liked him or disliked him the fact remained that for all these years he had continued to be the hero of her drama, a

most unsatisfactory hero, to be sure, playing a curiously illusive part for a person in that prominent position, but nevertheless the hero. He was the hero still; she was exasperated to find that an interval of time and distance had made no difference in the effect that his mere presence produced upon her.

Her thoughts next occupied themselves with a happy year at the New York Art League, and then they took a voyage across the Atlantic with some fellow art students, — a miserable, seasick voyage, when death seemed preferable to life. After that there had come a wonderful new birth in Paris, when the dreams of her childhood were more than realized, when poetry clothed the very stones of the streets, and the air itself seemed full of indefinable romance. The spires of Notre Dame, the bridges that spanned the Seine, black-robed priests, long rows of lights with the Arc de l'Etoile at the end, hard-working days in her atelier, warm friendships with other girls, — all came rushing into her mind without sequence or system, blotting out the candle-lighted room in which she sat, while the strains of a Strauss waltz seemed to blend all these confused impressions into a harmonious, kaleidoscopic whole. She had an acute spasm of homesickness for that foreign land. It was all over, her enchanting student

life, while before her was Edgecomb, with its routine of quiet duties, its mild gayeties, and conventional inhabitants, with their strict but narrow sense of duty and their well-regulated minds.

She was roused from her reverie by Virginia Morley, who came across the room and seated herself in the vacant place by her side where Alan ought to have been.

"I 'm going to keep this seat for George," she announced. "He is depending upon dancing with you. He had to be late to-night, because there is a town-meeting; he 's getting to be quite a public character."

"I 'm glad to hear it," said Jean.

"Don't you find Edgecomb thrillingly exciting?" Virginia continued vivaciously. "It must seem so lively and satisfying after your student life in Paris. Is n't this the correct thing to say? You must be in a mood to appreciate the joys of a dull little country town, where people don't know or care anything about art."

Jean laughed, and found Miss Morley refreshing. Contact with a larger world had taught her that there are worse things than the society of an amusing woman, even if her voice and manner do jar on your nerves.

"My dear, I hope you have come home in

a properly domestic frame of mind," Virginia went on. "Art is all very well in Paris, but housework suits the Edgecomb ladies much better. To wind up with, there is always the happy marriage that is utterly unsuited to girls who paint, because they are so unpractical, but that is the just reward of the thoroughly domestic."

"Heaven forbid!" Jean exclaimed fervently.

"I've been all through the mill," said Virginia, "and as I have no talents I tried being properly domestic, but even that failed to bring the prince. I don't despair yet, although he's a little late in coming, as I'm now thirty-two. By the way, the dear Edgecomb ladies seem to forget that we can't all be married unless we turn Mormons. I once suggested Polygamy as a solution when Mrs. Bentley was bemoaning that there were so many old maids in town, and she looked so shocked! You look shocked too."

"Do I?"

"Yes, you often make me feel as if I've been hopelessly vulgar when I've merely tried to be funny, but I love you just the same. What do you suppose I have gone into as a little interlude before the prince comes? Philanthropy! Never try it, never! It is absorbing, to be sure, and you have the satisfaction of knowing

that the Mrs. Bentleys of the world approve of you, but you never by any chance get the approval of the class you are trying to help."

As Miss Morley talked, Jean glanced from time to time at Alan Nichols, and noticed with a little pang that when he was able to claim Elsie his face brightened perceptibly.

"How well your cousin is looking to-night," Virginia said, following Jean's eyes. "She always makes me think of a Shetland pony, she is so little and complete, and will never grow any more."

"Mentally and morally you mean?"

"Yes."

"I don't agree with you. I am sure we can all of us grow."

"You can. You will keep on growing to the end of the chapter, and I can predict that you will be more charming as a woman of seventy than as a girl of twenty."

"Thank you; but seventy seems a good while to wait."

"How naughty of you, my dear! you know perfectly well that you are charming now. If you could hear what George says — here he comes."

While she was abroad, George Morley had almost slipped out of Jean's recollection, but since her return she had found him a pleasant

element in her life. He seemed younger than she, although he was in fact two years older. He did not share any of her interests, but he was so cheerful and sunny that it was impossible not to like him, although she knew that he had the reputation of being a great flirt, and was equally pleasant to every girl in Edgecomb.

"You see I have been waiting for you. I could not think of dancing before you came," Jean said, with a smile, as George led her off for a waltz. He always made her feel lighthearted and frivolous.

"That was very good of you."

"Of course you know I mean nobody has asked me to dance. It is natural, however, to be a wallflower in Edgecomb, and to have you coming to my rescue. I haven't forgotten that you used to be very good to me at dancing-school."

Jean was quite unconscious that several pairs of eyes were following her with interest.

"Who is that tall, dark, striking-looking girl in the white dress with the red flowers, waltzing with George Morley?" one of the summer visitors asked.

"Jean Reycroft, Mr. Thorndyke's granddaughter. She has just come home from studying art abroad."

"And so that is little Jean Reycroft! I remember her as such an awkward, shy girl. How she has improved! She 's rather stiff, to be sure, but George Morley could make even a stick dance."

After George had led Jean to a seat, and was still carrying on an animated conversation with her, she saw Alan Nichols crossing the room in a leisurely manner.

"Miss Reycroft, may I have the pleasure of taking you out to supper?" he was asking her presently.

She felt her heart beating in the same old absurdly quick fashion, and speech forsaking her, for one of the trials in having been born shy is that no matter how self-possessed one may become in later life, the malady is liable to return under certain conditions.

"I — I shall be very glad," she stammered.

"Come, now, that 's awfully mean of you," said George. "I was going to take Jean out to supper myself — Miss Reycroft, I beg her pardon; she always used to be Jean."

"I like to be Jean still to my friends."

"Now I think of it, I believe I did engage you some time ago, did n't I?" George inquired insinuatingly.

"Come, now, that won't go down," said Alan. "Miss Jean is a truthful person if you are not.

I will leave it to her, for I am as sure of her word as of George Washington's."

She was flattered to find that he had not forgotten that far-away conversation, which was indelibly impressed in its every sentence upon her memory, and although she was angry with him for ignoring her until she had ceased to be a wallflower, she could not help a sudden exhilaration of spirits, while the dreary evening became full of delightful possibilities.

"It is good to think that you have come back to Edgecomb to live," Alan began, after he had ensconced her in the music-room and brought her some supper. "I suppose it seems pleasant to you to be at home again." This was the tiresome remark that everybody made.

"It is delightful to be with my grandfather and Helen," she replied. "Only Paris is a little more — varied than Edgecomb."

"Yes, you must find it dull here. I should, if I could choose between Edgecomb and Europe. In fact, I do find it dull now, horribly, depressingly dull."

"Thank you."

He gave her an amused look, and began to laugh.

"You must tell me all about your life in Paris," he said; "it has always been one of my dreams to go abroad."

"Where would you go first?" she asked, and in a moment the tables were turned, and he, who had never crossed the ocean, was giving her a full account of all that he would like to see, while she, who had seen so much, was silent.

"I have at least learned the art of drawing him out," she thought with satisfaction, tinged with malice. She had the pleasure of seeing him more animated than he had been at any time during the evening. Suddenly she glanced across the room, and saw an expression on her cousin's face that made her sure her pleasure meant Elsie's pain. It was gone in a moment, and the next instant Elsie was laughing and chatting merrily with George Morley.

"How pretty your cousin looks this evening," said Alan. "I should n't have supposed yellow would suit her so well."

"Yes, it is very becoming to her."

Elsie, seeing Alan's eyes fastened upon her, redoubled her gayety.

"She is an unconscionable little flirt," he muttered.

Jean looked up with a smile. "If I should speak the absolute truth you believe in, what do you suppose I should say?"

"That you don't quite approve of your fascinating cousin."

"No; I should own that I should like nothing

so much as the power to be an unconscionable flirt myself."

"You could n't be if you tried, and you would n't be if you could."

"Yes, I would be, but I know I can't. I believe all girls are frivolous inside, and it is merely a question of the way one looks — and opportunity."

"I agree with you that we are all more alike than appears on the surface. Some of our friends have a little more skill in disguising their thoughts, that is all. They are the conventional persons who never surprise us, because they have been drilled to repress their emotions, but probably inside they are quite as heterodox as you and I."

It pleased her to be classed with him. "And yet there are always stupid people and intelligent people," she went on, following out the argument. "That makes an impassable barrier apart from training."

"I 'm glad we are intelligent," he said, "for there are n't too many of us in Edgecomb. And if we are truthful, too, if we say what we really think, we can get a great deal of pleasure out of each other's society."

"Even if we find life dull, horribly, depressingly dull," she reminded him.

"I suspect that you have never found any

place depressingly dull in your whole life," he returned. "You carry your own atmosphere around with you."

At this point the music struck up, and Alan hastily rose.

"I beg your pardon, but I am engaged for this dance."

A moment later he was waltzing with Elsie, and the rest of Jean's evening was a blank.

IV

During the years that Jean was in Europe, Alan had been only a vaguely interesting figure entirely outside her own life, but now she could not help feeling a thrill of excitement whenever she passed him on the street. His character puzzled her by its contradictions, but there was always a fascination in its study which came from his varying moods, for he sometimes talked to her as if they were intimate friends with a common knowledge of life and the world, and the very next day he would ignore her completely. It did not occur to her to try to keep her thoughts from Alan Nichols, for she was so sure she should not fall in love with him; to begin with, she saw his faults too plainly, and in the second place, she was too much interested in her painting.

She told herself she had what might be termed the unmarried temperament, for she was so indifferent to the hopes and occupations of the average woman. Nevertheless what Alan thought, what he said, and what he did were of more consequence to her than anything but her

work. She had days of putting him entirely out of her mind and becoming absorbed in her painting, with a pleased certainty that it was far more important to her than any man could ever be, but there were other times when she was depressed about her pictures and went over and over again all her conversations with Alan. Their bulk was increasing rapidly, and there would soon be enough of them to fill a volume. Most interesting of all was a talk they had one summer afternoon. There had been a picnic on the shores of the river, and the other young people had strolled away, leaving Jean busy with a sketch, and Alan lazily watching her.

"Those willows are a very attractive subject," he began.

"I am glad you like it. I am making some illustrations for a book for children that one of my friends has written."

"That is good. I shall want to see them when they come out. There is nothing in the world I should like so much as to write a book."

"Do, and I will illustrate it."

"That would be charming. Do you know I have had a magazine article accepted? It is not particularly promising from the pictorial point of view, and I am afraid you would find it dull. The subject is the 'Corruption in City Governments.'"

Jean's interest was sufficient to make him proceed with a detailed account of his views, and then the talk drifted from politics in this country to politics in England, and to Meredith's political novel, "Beauchamp's Career," which Jean had just read, by Alan's recommendation.

"He draws superb women, glorious women," he said. "Only they make you dissatisfied with the flesh and blood types in actual life. Renée, Cecilia, Rosamund and Jenny; Clara Middleton, Lucy, Rhoda Fleming, — what a galaxy! I could fall in love with any one of them. How noble they are! How absolutely reliable and true! I could never fall in love with a woman in whom I had not entire confidence."

"Could n't you? I should say that reliability was n't a trait that men usually fall in love with."

"I grant that unreliable women have a certain charm." He glanced at Elsie and George Morley as he spoke. They were sitting on the other side of the river, under an elm-tree, and Elsie, all in white, was letting George fan her with her broad-brimmed hat, while she glanced up at him with a look of child-like absorption.

"I don't care for charm in a woman," Alan went on brusquely. "I don't even insist on beauty in my ideal. All I ask is that she shall have a certain amount of personal attraction,

joined to a fine mind and a superior moral nature. She must be absolutely truthful and sincere, and utterly devoted to me. In short, a Cecilia or a Renée in her power of loving."

"Is n't it asking a great deal of such a superior being that she should be utterly devoted to you? I think you ought to give us all a little share in her."

"I should want her absolutely devoted to me; perhaps that sounds selfish, but as a reward she would find me absolutely devoted to her."

"You would want her to be practical and a good housekeeper?"

"Of course."

"And if you grew tired of this paragon, I suppose you, with your belief in expressing just what is in your mind, would reserve to yourself the right to say, 'My wife is an aggravating woman. She is so hopelessly superior that I can never live up to her'?"

"Yes, I shall pour all my tribulations into your sympathetic ears."

"That will be interesting, but meanwhile I shall have become her intimate friend, and so I shall hear both sides, for as she is to be absolutely truthful, she will pour all your shortcomings into my sympathetic ears."

"She will think me perfection."

There was a long pause after this. Alan was

watching Elsie and George, who had risen and were walking slowly across the old stone bridge. They paused half-way over, and stopped to lean on the parapet and to look down into the lazy stream. Jean thought that she had never seen anything more paintable than Elsie in her white gown, bareheaded, with the summer sunlight falling on her golden hair, and the summer color in her cheeks. She looked like a Dresden-china shepherdess as she stood there swinging her Leghorn hat with its garland of pink roses.

"Look at her," said Jean, "and tell me if a living, breathing girl is n't worth all the heroines in books?"

Alan did not answer; he had grown suddenly absorbed in Jean's sketch of the willows.

"Will you promise to send me a copy of the book when it comes out?" he asked her.

"No, for I shall probably have only one copy."

"Will you lend it to me then? You don't know how interested I am in your work."

Elsie and George were coming nearer and nearer.

"Perhaps I will lend it to you if you really care to see it."

"Jean has been telling me about the illustrations she is making," Alan observed to George and Elsie a moment later.

"How perfectly thrilling!" exclaimed Elsie. "I haven't been talking to George about anything half so interesting."

She and George passed on, looking pleased with each other to the point of exaggeration.

"Those two are well matched," said Alan.

After this Jean often pictured to herself the sort of woman with whom Alan would eventually fall in love, who, it was safe to predict, would not closely resemble his ideal. She hoped it would be many years before he found her, and that meantime his friendship for herself would have sure and solid foundations. After all, the two best things in life were work and friendship. She was very happy, and lived continually in a dream. There are some persons to whom the world is always a place full of fresh interest. They may be blue or sad, but they are almost never bored. Jean belonged to this class. If she lost a train, or reached a concert too early, instead of fuming at her wasted time she at once began to form schemes for future work, or else entered a land of fancy where Alan was always waiting. She wondered, supposing she could know the class of subjects with which her friends busied themselves at such times, if she would be as much surprised as they would be could they see into her mind. There was one delightful never-to-be-forgotten

afternoon, when she reached the station, after a day of shopping in Boston, just too late for the train she had intended to take.

"I have almost an hour to wait," she said, with a sense of luxurious comfort. "I shall have time, yes there really will be time to read Alan's article."

She bought the magazine in which it appeared, in a shy way, with a half-guilty feeling, and then settled herself in a corner of the dingy waiting-room in the Fitchburg station, thinking that life could hardly offer anything more delightful. The subject, "Corruption in City Governments," was not particularly promising, but if she had been reading an exciting romance Jean's attention could not have been more securely chained. Sometimes she had to read a paragraph over two or three times before understanding it, but the mere look of the words on the page gave her pleasure. It must be confessed that the average reader would have found it a dry article, but Jean exulted in every fragment that could be termed interesting, and when she came to the patriotic words at the end, felt a glow of pride and happiness in having the author for a friend. Time sped by. She was unaware of its passage; she did not see the people around her, and for moments together forgot where she was. She had entered a world

of noble sentiments, where politicians gloried in serving their country, with no thought of personal ends. She was happy with the impersonal happiness which comes when, setting self aside, we rejoice in the great scheme of things, in the possible good that at such moments seems a reasonable hope. At last she bethought herself to look at the clock. She had missed a second train; and there would not be another for an hour. Well, what did it matter? It was very stupid of her, she admitted, but she never once considered it a waste of time. Were those moments when one was granted a glimpse into an ideal world so frequent that one must measure them by trivial earthly standards? When Jean finally went to her train she left her magazine in the waiting-room; for although her feeling for Alan was merely that of cool and somewhat critical friendship, she preferred not to have Helen know of her purchase, for her sister had one of those simple minds not capable of grasping subtilties of thought out of the common course, and although she would say nothing, for Helen could always be relied upon, she might think —

It was growing dark when Jean's train reached Edgecomb, which was twenty miles from Boston, and as she stepped out on the platform she noticed Alan's tall figure just ahead of her.

His sister Annie was beside him limping painfully, holding a shopping-bag in one hand and two large bundles in the other.

"Alan, don't you want to carry these bundles for me?" she asked fretfully.

"I don't want to," he returned irritably, "but I will. Give them to me. Why women always contrive to accumulate so many bundles when they go to town I can't imagine."

Jean had intended to join them, but now she drew back, feeling as if she had received a shock of cold water.

"There are some disadvantages in always telling the whole truth," she thought.

When the book containing Jean's illustrations was published, Alan at once asked to see it. He said so much on the subject that she finally promised to lend it to him, on condition that he would send it back after a day or two. She was flattered that he should feel an interest in her work, and she pictured him glancing over the book with something of the feeling she had had when she read his article. Days went by, however, and Alan did not return it. Jean had promised to lend the volume to several friends, and when a fortnight had passed she felt she must ask him for it, and had just decided to write to him when she met him not far from his house.

"Good afternoon," he said. "It is a long time since I have seen you."

"Yes. By the way, Alan, could you, without too much trouble, let me have my book back? I have promised to lend it to Mrs. Shimmin and Mrs. Bentley."

"Your book?" he inquired blankly.

"Yes — my illustrations that you asked to see."

"I 'm ashamed to say that I had forgotten all about them. The parcel came one night just as I was going out, and I laid it aside and never thought of it from that moment to this. If you are in a hurry for it I will run in and get it now. I should like time to look at the illustrations carefully, however, so if you don't mind I will keep it a day or two longer."

"I would rather have it now, please. You can see the illustrations in two minutes; there are only six of them."

"I have n't offended you, have I? You don't know how anxious I am to see the drawings, but I have grown horribly absent minded of late, and often forget the things I care most about."

"You have n't offended me in the least."

Alan went into the house for the book and overtook Jean presently. He had evidently made a hurried examination of her illustrations.

"Your sketches are very charming," he said. "I shall buy the book for one of my small cousins at Christmas, and then I shall have time to look at it carefully."

After Alan left her, Jean reviewed the situation and made up her mind that he had never had the smallest interest either in her or her work. Had the cases been reversed, and had he lent her a book that he had illustrated, how eagerly she would have withdrawn it from its wrapper and given one quick, comprehensive glance at the contents, before going to her engagement, saving it for a more careful scrutiny later. To be sure, men were far busier and more preoccupied than women, but making every allowance she reasonably could, she was forced to give up her dream of being a friend who was in the least necessary to his happiness. She was glad she was not in love with him, for then it would have been much harder to bear.

All her other friends and acquaintances were cordial in their appreciation of her illustrations. Something concrete and marketable appealed to them. Illustrations for which money had been paid were a very different matter from a picture that had been exhibited in the Paris Salon but never sold. The same afternoon that Jean received the stab from Alan, she had an experience which ought to have soothed her wounded

pride. She had been making calls at the other end of the town, and getting caught in the rain, decided to stop at the Morleys' and borrow an umbrella. George saw her come up the walk and went to the door himself.

"Is your sister at home?" she asked. "I came to borrow an umbrella, and I must not stop but a minute, for I want to get back before it rains hard."

"You can't do that, and as my sister and the umbrella are both at home, you had better come in and wait until the shower is over. If you 'll excuse me," he said after he had ushered her into the parlor, "I 'll tell Virginia that you are here."

While he was gone Jean let her eyes wander freely around the room that had been the scene of her childish misery. She never entered it without being carried back in imagination to that unhappy evening. Viewed with grown-up eyes, the parlor was even more depressingly ugly than she had thought it when a child. The confused wall-paper and the hideous Brussels carpet, the atrocious pictures in their flashy frames, the gilt-legged, marble-topped tables, the statues, and the plush furniture combined to make it a hopeless whole. It seemed strange to think that all these ugly things could live on, after their former master and mistress had left

the world; that man, so superior to mere matter, could nevertheless pass away into the unknown, leaving the dreary stamp of his individuality behind him. When George came back, she had her eyes fixed on a marble mantelpiece on which stood an impossible clock.

"Is n't it hideous?" he asked, as his eyes followed hers.

"What?" she inquired, startled to find that he had read her thoughts.

"The whole room. It makes me ill every time I come into it, but Virginia likes to leave things as they were."

"One grows fond of things for so many different reasons," Jean returned sympathetically. "I can understand Virginia's love for this room. There is so much in a place where people we care for have been, besides the furniture."

"Nevertheless it is frightful," George maintained with conviction; "I have always felt it vaguely, but whenever I have been at your house I know it. I don't see how you contrive to make that studio of yours so homelike, with just a few bits of bright drapery and a couple of rugs."

"I am glad you find it homelike. I remember you had to sit on the wood-box the last time I had an afternoon-tea."

"Jean, I 've been meaning to go to see you for the last week, to tell you how much I like

your illustrations. I have bought half a dozen of the books to send to some little boy friends of mine. It must be delightful to be able to draw like that and please everybody. By the way, would you mind writing your name in one of the copies? The little boy who is to have it would value it so much more."

"I shall be very glad to write my name in it."

She sat down at an ugly writing-table with a vivid green cover, and he brought her the book and stood watching her as she wrote "Jean Reycroft," in a hand that was as individual as herself. It was distinct, with more character than style, and it slanted backwards a little, although not enough to make it a backhanded writing. As she sat there in her gray gown, the one restful bit of color in the discordant room, she had the unconscious charm of the woman who has grown to have a measure both of beauty and grace without realizing how much she has changed. The greater harmony of her inner nature showed itself in her expression. Her dark eyes had a new softness in them, and her smile, which was not frequent, was as welcome when it came as the occasional flashes of sunshine on a gray day. There was a picturesqueness rather than style about her dress, and with all her absorption in her profession she

had a certain mingled sweetness and seriousness of character that made her very human. She was a woman who suggested unlimited possibilities to the persons who were in sympathy with her, while those who were not could never understand why she was called charming, for they did not think her pretty, and had never heard her say one clever thing.

"Now the date," said George, as she finished.

"If it is to be given away at Christmas, I suppose you want me to put December 25th?"

"No, to-day, please."

She wrote November 30th, and then, as a vision of some curly headed little boy came before her, she asked what sort of child was to have it.

"He is a very well-meaning boy," said George, "but the kind of fellow who is pretty sure to go through life never getting what he wants most."

"Poor little soul. You can't always tell, however, how children will grow up. I used to be the kind of child who never got what I wanted, and now I am a very contented person."

"I wish you were n't so contented."

"How unkind of you! Why?"

"Because it would put you more on a level with other people."

"But you certainly are happy. I always think of you as the happiest person I know, far more so than I am. You need n't grudge me my small crumbs of content. They have been won by hard work."

At this point Virginia came rustling into the room, in a brocaded gown of a gaudy pattern, which fitted her marvelously and showed off her fine figure to perfection. She seemed completely in harmony with her environment.

When the worst of the shower was over and Jean at last rose to go, George went to get an umbrella for her.

"That room will always seem more homelike now," he said simply.

"You are very kind to say so," said Jean, and she wondered why it was that the men who liked her best were always those to whom she was indifferent.

V

A FEW days after Christmas, as Jean was coming out of the post-office, she was joined by Virginia Morley.

"I suppose you were quite prepared for the new engagement?" Virginia began. "It has been a great surprise to the rest of us."

"The new engagement?" Jean repeated blankly.

"Yes. You don't mean to say it is n't out? Excuse me if I have been indiscreet, and please forget what I have said."

"What engagement do you mean?"

"Why, your cousin's."

"There must be some mistake. If Elsie were engaged, I am sure she would have told me the first thing."

"I should have said so, and yet I had it straight from Annie Nichols. She told me that her brother was engaged to Elsie Thorndyke."

Jean had a strange feeling at her heart. She was conscious that something was happening to her face. Her mouth was unsteady, she was showing — Virginia would imagine — what

would she not imagine? The truth? But what was the truth?

"If it is so," Jean said in a cold, constrained voice, "Alan is to be warmly congratulated, for Elsie is a dear little thing."

"Yes, and yet not at all the sort of girl I should have thought he would have cared for. She is so frivolous, and he is so grave. He is so absorbed in politics, and she is so feather-brained."

As soon as Jean could escape from Virginia she went home, and going up to her studio began to work on an unfinished illustration. At last she put it down and went over to the window, looking out at the white fields of snow, with the hill stretching away at her left, and at the summit the slender white spire of her grandfather's meeting-house. Very cold and desolate the prospect looked.

"I don't believe it," she said to herself more than once.

And yet, as she reviewed the events of the last six months, she had a growing certainty that this astonishing story was true. Alan's occasional stringent criticisms of Elsie, his over-emphatic praise of truth, his indifference to herself, his fits of preoccupation, — all pointed to the fact that he had been trying to ignore a feeling that his judgment did not approve, which had

grown strong enough at last to sweep him off his feet.

"They are totally unsuited to each other," she thought over and over again. "They can never be happy. Why, even I, faulty and unpractical as I am, even I would have made him a far better wife."

It was revealed to her with the clearness of a flash of lightning how well she could love; how she had it in her to give devotion in unstinted measure, unselfish affection that asked little in return. How it was in her to give up her individual life and throw herself into the interests of the man she loved. "If they are engaged they will never be married," she said to herself at last. "Elsie would mind his faults too much. He is very faulty, — oh, why can't I think of his faults?"

There came a light tap on the studio door. "Jean," called a soft voice, "may I come in? Helen told me to walk right up."

Jean sat down hastily at her table and began to work on her illustration. "Come in, Elsie," she said indifferently.

Elsie was dressed in a dark blue velveteen gown and jacket trimmed with ermine, and a Gainsborough hat with dark blue ostrich feathers. The wind had given her a bright color and blown the little gold curls about her fore-

head. Not one touch of her charming appearance was lost upon Jean.

"Why, Jean, how solemn you look! I've never seen such an industrious girl. Can't you stop working just for one moment and give me a little attention? I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I've something important to say, for once in my life. Oh, Jean, I'm so happy! You are too sensible and matter of fact to sympathize with me. But Helen has been so good to me. She is delighted. You can never guess — Jean, I'm engaged! Engaged to Alan Nichols! I've cared for him all my life and I'm so happy. Don't tell me I'm a great goose, as your uncle James did, even if you do think so. You know I'm different from you Reycrofts. I'm not clever, and so love seems to me the nicest thing in the whole world. Kiss me, Jean, and don't look so disapproving."

"I'm not disapproving. I'm only a little confused by the suddenness of this. I'm very glad for you, and I wish you both all possible happiness."

"It is so nice that you and Alan are such good friends. He has a high opinion of you. Indeed, I used to be jealous of you at one time."

"That was very foolish. I could have set your mind at rest on that point."

"Oh, I knew you did n't care for him, but I

thought he would be sure to fall in love with you, for you know such a lot, and can talk to him so intelligently, which I never can. And I thought he 'd make you care for him in time. He was sure I did not like him. Fancy! When I 've been in love with him ever since I was in pinafores! He thought I liked George Morley! George Morley, indeed! As if he could hold a candle to Alan! I said something to Alan about you once, when I was very miserable, and he said " —

" Never mind what he said, Elsie."

" But I must tell you, because it was something very nice. He said you were made for friendship, but not for love. Well, that is a great deal more sensible, I know, but somehow I 'd rather be the fool I am. How I do go on! I know you think me a driveling idiot! "

" No, I don't," and Jean added, to Elsie's intense astonishment, " I am sure there is nothing in life so much worth while as being in love with some one who loves you, and I think you are a very lucky girl, and I 'm glad Alan and I are such good friends, and " — she ended by flinging her arms about Elsie's neck and kissing her.

" Jean, have you gone crazy? " Elsie asked, half laughing, half crying, as she disengaged herself from her cousin's embrace.

"No, I'm only glad you are so happy."

After Elsie's departure, as Jean stood in the deepening twilight, she wondered if this were true. Something of the desolation she had felt as a little girl, when she had lain in sleepless misery, tortured because Alan liked Elsie best, came over her, and she had a sense of rebellion in reflecting that physical charms were so all-powerful, even with serious, sensible men. But she was not as wretched as she had been when a child, for she no longer wanted to be any other than herself. Her love for her work precluded that. A great love for work, like a great love for a human being, brings with it something good, which cancels all pain, and makes its possessor glad, in spite of everything, to be himself. It grew darker and darker, until the plaster casts in Jean's studio seemed like ghosts staring at her. It grew still darker, until even the ghosts faded out of sight.

"Supper is ready," called Helen's cheerful voice. "Are you sitting in the dark, Jean? I fancied you were hard at work, and I would not disturb you until the last minute, although I was dying to talk over Elsie's engagement. Isn't it amazing?"

"No. I can't say it is. The more I think about it, the more I wonder I did not expect it all along."

Dr. Reycroft dropped in to tea. He was a man who railed at marriage, and a new engagement was always a source of fresh annoyance to him.

"Fools, fools, double-dyed fools?" he began. "Why don't people know when they are well off? I can't see how any girl who has a comfortable home can ever want to get married. I met your cousin this afternoon," he continued, turning to Jean, "and I told her plainly that I thought her an idiot at her age to tie herself down."

"Uncle James," said Helen, "I am sure you are tremendously sentimental underneath, and are afraid of letting yourself go, or you would n't be so bitter. I know that with every new engagement you are really envious of the happy man."

The doctor looked at her sharply with his penetrating eyes. Then he smiled. "I am profoundly and deeply grateful that I am not 'in it,'" he announced.

"Now, I am willing to acknowledge that I always wish I were 'in it,'" Helen assured him serenely. "I am a thoroughly sentimental person, and when I see two people in love, I always wish there was some one in love with me. That is why I enjoy you so much, grandfather," and she turned to Mr. Thorndyke with one of her bright smiles.

"Poor Helen! it is hard that one of your sentimental turn of mind should have to put up with an old grandfather and an old uncle."

"But that is part of the charm of it," Helen asseverated. "Younger men think me quite old. You know one is n't exactly a young girl at thirty-two," and she appealed to Dr. Reycroft. "But you and my grandfather make me feel as if I were eternally young and eternally charming."

"So you are," said Jean. "You are a great deal younger than I am, as well as infinitely more charming. Uncle James and I know the world," she went on. "We have discovered that our dolls are stuffed with sawdust; so we try to be cynical, don't we, Uncle James? As I am never going to marry, either, some day I will keep house for you."

"Good heavens, Jean," her uncle exclaimed in pretended horror, "that would be a calamity indeed! To have an unpractical dauber in oils trailing her possessions around my house" —

"I should take your office for a studio," she proceeded calmly. "I have always wanted one on the ground floor; and I would use all my spare time in taking likenesses of you. I would try all processes, — charcoal, oils, water-colors, and pastels."

"I should be forced into matrimony in self-

defense, or better still, I should turn match-maker and marry you off to the first high-tempered man who came along. By the way, marriage would be good discipline for you, young woman; it would take down your confounded pride."

"My confounded pride? I am so humble-minded I don't even know what you mean."

"Yes, your confounded pride. You know you think you are a great deal cleverer than any man in Edgecomb, letting alone the women."

"Indeed I don't."

"You consider that having had your pictures exhibited in a Paris saloon" (her uncle always willfully insisted upon adopting this pronunciation) "is such an honor that you won't speak to 'the likes' of us. I always hoped your career would be blighted by adversity. People who have failed are so comfortable to have around. They are like an atrociously ugly person, — they make us contented with ourselves, but you are 'that cocky' with your oils and charcoals and varnishes and middle-foregrounds that there is no living with you."

"Uncle James, when will you give me another sitting?"

"On the day of my wedding."

"Then you will force me into turning match-

maker. Really, Uncle James, you have no idea how distinguished you are going to look."

"I am too old a bird to be caught with flattery."

"But truly, I do so hate to have to do the rest of my picture from memory, when I have the honor to be niece of the dear original."

"Get along with you! An abode in foreign lands has not improved your manners. You used to have the unvarnished sincerity of the Reycrofts."

"It is probably my contact with varnishes that has improved my manners. You know you used to hate me when I adopted plain, unvarnished sincerity."

"You were a very unattractive little girl."

"And you were a very disagreeable man. But that was a great many years ago. I appeal to Helen. Was n't he a very disagreeable man?"

"Was n't she a very unattractive little girl?"

"I always found you both perfectly delightful," Helen replied impartially.

When the doctor went away that evening, Jean insisted that he should kiss her good-night. This she always mischievously required, simply, as she explained to him, because she knew he disliked it so much, but to-night he did not seem to dislike it. He looked at her thoughtfully a

moment and observed, "Jean, you are getting to be quite a pretty girl."

"Thank you," she answered demurely; "I have no doubt I shall turn out fairly well. Virginia Morley told me she thought I should be quite charming at seventy."

Dr. Reycroft had never taken anything but a perfunctory interest in his niece so long as she had remained a shy, awkward girl. He was one of those men who distrust charm in women, but like most of his class he did not take the slightest interest in a woman unless she had charm. When his niece had come back from abroad, self-possessed and frankly fond of him, his feelings underwent a sudden change, and it ended in their becoming excellent friends. They were too reserved to reach each other on the more serious side, but they had a charming surface congeniality, and that peculiar likeness in humor which is more often a bond than likeness in religion.

That night, when Jean went up to her room, she said to herself, "There is one comfort: they don't suspect that I am not pleased by Elsie's engagement."

It was not so much personal disappointment she felt, she assured herself; it was more the sense of flatness and unprofitableness in actual life that comes over one after closing an exciting

novel. She realized that she had been living for the last few months in too stimulating an atmosphere.

Her chief interest, dating back to the time when she was a little girl, had been suddenly taken from her. There was no longer a land of fancy where she could retreat whenever she was tired of her work or bored by reality; that chapter of her life was closed. If Alan had only been engaged to a woman who was in the least suited to him, and with whom he would have the smallest chance of being happy, she could have borne it better, she told herself. Then she would allow herself to hope again that Elsie and Alan would never be married. His prospects were not sufficiently good to permit of an immediate marriage, and she could never bear the strain of a long engagement.

Jean gave herself over to planning one more scene with Alan, saying it was for the last time. When she congratulated him on his engagement she intended to make one mischievous allusion to his ideal, and then gracefully add that Elsie was far more lovable than any girl could be who had such a combination of superior qualities. When she saw him, however, there was something in his grave composure that froze her, and she was vexed to find herself as shy as she had been at fourteen. They met at Elsie's house,

and Elsie's mother, together with Mrs. Shimmin, Mrs. Bentley, and Susie Endicott were sitting primly against a background of roses. Elsie had not as yet come down, and there was the stiffness in the whole company that was apt to overtake those unlucky individuals who found themselves in Alan's society when he was not in a responsive mood.

"Now I must do the thing," thought Jean, her New England conscience not permitting her to wait for a more favorable opportunity. She walked up to Alan and shook hands with him coldly. Her careless words concerning his ideal died on her lips. They could not be uttered before all those witnesses, and she knew now that she should never have the courage to say them, for the actual Alan was too formidable to be treated so lightly. She wondered at her past temerity.

"I congratulate you on your engagement, Alan," she said stiffly.

"Thank you," he returned without any trace of embarrassment, but even more coldly than she herself had spoken.

At this point Elsie came gayly into the room, and the atmosphere instantly cleared.

Elsie was not afraid of Alan in any mood.

VI

That was the last chance Jean had of seeing the lovers together for some weeks, for a few days afterwards Elsie came down with scarlet fever. Elsie's mother, a pretty, graceful woman, with a positive genius for complaining, had a genuine grievance at last, but she was so completely quarantined that she was obliged to pour her woes into the ears of the doctor. It must be confessed that a less promising confidant could not have been found. He would drop in later in the day to see Helen and Jean, and vent his vexation on them.

"She 's the most impossible woman, that aunt of yours, the most infernal fool!" he would ejaculate. "How your uncle ever came to marry her I can't see. Poor fellow! It was a mercy he died young! Good Lord! what an easy thing it is to be killed in a railroad accident, compared with dying by slow inches of a woman's tongue."

"You don't get at Aunt Isabel's best side," Helen said. "She has the kindest heart."

"Has she? Then deliver me from a kind heart! She is entirely upset because I won't

let Nichols see Elsie. She says a man was n't afraid of a little thing like scarlet fever, when she was a girl. I should like to give him a few points. How can any man in his senses, who has seen the mother, want to marry the daughter? I am not sure that it would not be a good plan to let Alan visit the widow and fatherless in their affliction, and get cured of his infatuation or die of scarlet fever. Either alternative would be better than marrying the daughter of Isabel Thorndyke."

"A little while ago it was Elsie whom you pitied, because she was going to marry Alan," Helen reminded him.

"So I did, but after having the honor of an intimate acquaintance with her mother, I don't wonder she thinks any man, no matter how much of a prig he is, would be a pleasant change."

"Alan is n't a prig," said Helen. "He is merely a person of theories; but life will knock those out of him. I remember he used to say he could never marry because he could not promise to love a woman forever. How could he tell that his feeling would n't change?"

"There is one clause in the marriage service that would keep me out of matrimony," said the doctor. "I could promise to love a woman if she were richer or poorer, and in joy and sorrow, and in health; but I could not be sure

of myself in sickness. I have seen too much of sick women; and while the characters of some of them shine only the more brightly when they are ill, there are others — of whom I will not speak. And the worst of it is you can never tell which kind a woman is going to be until she is tried."

"If I were you, I should expose the lady I was thinking of marrying to diphtheria or scarlet fever, and see how she bore the test," suggested Jean.

When Mrs. Thorndyke was at last released from quarantine, she hastened to the parsonage to tell her grievances to her nieces.

"My dears," she complained, "you can't imagine how terrible it was to be so perfectly isolated, shut up with the cook and a trained nurse and my sick child. It was very kind of you to write to me so often, Helen, only it made it all the more aggravating to know of all the things that were going on in the outside world, while I was *incarcerated in my dungeon.* I can never understand doctors, they are so unfeeling, and have so little common sense. For if a doctor can go about without carrying infection, of course other people can; those little distinctions are so absurd! If Dr. Reycroft could come to see us, why could n't Alan? However, Elsie said she was glad he did n't see her, for she looked like such a fright. So all the poor fellow could do

was to come to the window and talk to me, and he was always in such a hurry, just going to catch a train, or on his way to some engagement, so it was n't very satisfactory. Then another such aggravating thing happened. Of course Alan could write to Elsie, but she was n't allowed to write to him, — such nonsense! And what do you think? She had to burn all his letters for fear of contagion. I call it very hard for a girl to have to burn her love letters. She says she knows them all by heart, but she may not remember them always. There never were such unlucky people as Elsie and me. I never heard of any other girl who had scarlet fever just as she was engaged. And now the worst of it is that having lost all this time Alan is crazy to be married. You know how impatient young men are when they are once engaged? He has a chance to take an important position with a good salary in Minneapolis, and so, as his father is too miserly to help him, he is going to give up the law, and he wants to be married at once, and carry my only child off to the wild West with him. Like all men, he has very little consideration for any one but himself."

"But really, Aunt Isabel, I don't see why it is n't the happiest thing that could happen. A long engagement is such a strain; and Minneapolis is a delightful place. Jean and I have friends there."

"I have told them that if they must be married, which is foolish enough, for Elsie is only twenty-two, and has never had any care, they had better be contented with less and live on here with me; but that does n't suit Alan, and as Elsie just lives and breathes in him she does n't see things as I do."

"Well, Aunt Isabel, it will be very hard for you to give Elsie up, but I don't see but what you will have to make up your mind to it. She is four years older than you were when you were married."

"Yes, but your uncle was nine years my senior."

"Then he was twenty-seven, just Alan's age."

"Whatever happens it will be very hard," Mrs. Thorndyke went on plaintively. "Either I shall have to be uprooted, and torn away from all my early associations, to follow my dear child to her new home in the far West, or else I shall have to stay behind and never have one easy moment."

"I think I know which Aunt Isabel's fate will be," Helen said to Jean with a smile, when their relative had departed.

Jean did not reply at once. She was trying to adjust herself to the future; for she had not realized before how sure she had been that something would occur to prevent this marriage.

"I cannot believe that they are really going to be married," she said at last, as if waking from a dream.

"If you had seen them together as much as I have, you could. They seem to live only for each other."

Jean quickly turned her head away and busied herself with straightening the books on the parlor table.

"When I have seen him with her, he has been quiet and cold," she said.

"That is because you are so cold you freeze him. You and he are both apt to be coldest when you feel most. I am so sentimental they are not afraid to show what they feel before me."

A fortnight later, when Jean was at work in her studio, there came the light tap on her door with which she was so familiar, and Elsie's low voice called, "Jean, darling, may I come in?"

"Of course you may," and this time Jean gave her cousin a cordial welcome.

"Jean," Elsie said, with a touch of shyness that was very becoming, "can you guess why I've come to see you this afternoon?"

"I think I can. I suppose you are going to tell me that you are to be married before long?"

"Yes, in six weeks."

"How I shall miss you! And the worst of

it is that you are going away without a regret, you aggravating child."

"Not without a regret; only nothing seems to matter much so long as I have Alan. Wait until you are in love, and you will see how it is. Jean, dear, I've come to ask you to be one of my bridesmaids."

Jean's color changed. "I will do anything for you but that, Elsie," she said hastily. "But really, you have no idea how absurdly shy I am about some things even now. I should spoil the whole effect of your wedding by my stiffness."

"You could n't be any stiffer than Alan. I don't expect a very free and easy wedding, so to speak. Jean, you must consent to be bridesmaid. Helen has, and it would look so odd to have your older sister, and not you. I am going to ask Susie Endicott, too, and I've got to have Annie Nichols, although I don't want her, because her feelings would be hurt if I did n't. I should think if a girl were lame she'd have sense enough to see that she had better not be a bridesmaid."

"Well, Elsie, although I'm not lame, I have the sense to see that a bridesmaid is not the rôle I'm calculated to shine in."

"My dear, I can't get along without you. You've always been my very best girl friend. You'll have to consent."

"I can't, Elsie. Please don't say anything more about it."

"But you must. Alan and I have decided it. He is as anxious to have you as I am. I mean to have a church wedding. Don't you think they are a great deal nicer?"

"I don't know. They are more solemn and impressive, certainly, but a house wedding is more homelike."

At this point a masculine voice was heard outside the half-open door saying, "May I come in? The maid told me to come up."

"I 'm so glad you 've come, Alan," said Elsie, "for you can persuade Jean to be one of our bridesmaids. I know you are as anxious to have her as I am."

"I shall be most happy if she will so honor us," he returned, with a certain stiffness that made Jean sure it was the first he had heard of it.

"Jean likes church weddings best, just as I do," Elsie continued. "She feels that a house wedding is n't half so solemn and religious."

Jean saw a cloud on Alan's face.

"I 'm sorry to disappoint you, Elsie," he said. "But I 've told you a great many times that I have an insuperable objection to church weddings. A justice of the peace is what I should really prefer," he added, with a little smile.

"But that would be so shocking! Especially when I have a dear old grandfather, all ready to marry me. Alan, as I never expect to have another wedding, don't you think it seems a little hard that I can't have the kind I want, in that dear old church, with a solemn hush, and the pew doors trimmed with flowers, and my grandfather with his silver hair? It would all be so impressive and beautiful."

"It does seem hard," Alan admitted. "But on the other hand I never expect to have another wedding, either, and I hate any fuss, and as I've said I won't have a church wedding I can't go back on my word."

"Can't you? I'm glad I'm not so terribly consistent. I change my mind twenty times a day."

"Then why not change it now?"

A sudden thought came to Elsie. "Jean," she said, "if I do have a house wedding you won't mind being a bridesmaid, will you? It is nothing to stand up in a house."

Jean hesitated a moment. "Yes, I'll be bridesmaid," she agreed at last.

After their interview with her was over, Jean watched Elsie and Alan go down the street. Elsie's face was turned away from her. She was looking up at Alan, and Jean's imagination could supply the adoring expression of her eyes. She could see Alan's face as he bent down

toward the little figure by his side, and there was a swift illumination of his usually grave countenance. Jean withdrew precipitately from the window. She was forced to admit that they were very happy. It was impossible to see why two such ill-assorted people had been attracted to each other, but it might be that the charm would hold. She could not help thinking that had she been in Alan's place she could not have failed to be disturbed by Elsie's little divergences from the truth, and that were she Elsie, Alan's quiet insistence on having his own way would have troubled her.

As the day of Elsie's wedding drew nearer and nearer, Jean did not even yet give up the hope that something would happen to prevent it. The preparations went on, however, relentlessly. Elsie had yielded point by point to Alan, with a docility that proved she was very much in love, — Elsie, who had heretofore gone through life with her every whim gratified. The wedding was to be a home one and of the very quietest kind. The two families and a dozen of Elsie's best friends were to be the only guests. The ceremony was to take place in the evening, and the young people were to start at once for their new home in the West.

At last the day came, and Jean found herself so busy assisting her aunt and cousin in their

preparations that she did not have time for consecutive thought. There was an undercurrent of acute depression which never left her, but she had grown so accustomed to this that she hardly gave it a thought.

When the hour for the wedding arrived, and Elsie came down stairs like a radiant vision in her white gown and filmy veil, it did not seem like reality, but some troubled dream. Alan came forward to meet Elsie, and they took their places in the flower-bedecked bow-window, with their backs turned to the world. It was a natural part of the dream that she and Helen should be standing there, with Annie Nichols and Susie Endicott. Her grandfather, with his silver hair and face like a benediction, completed the picture. Jean's whole attention was bent on not revealing what she felt. She had the comfort of being able at will to present a face as expressionless as a mask. Behind this defense she was wont to retreat whenever her feelings were touched. This evening she stood erect and pale, looking as cold and unemotional as a statue.

What was her grandfather saying now? "In sickness and health, in joy and in grief, in the varied changes of this earthly life, so long as you both shall live?" The words sounded dream-like and unreal. Then came a low "I will."

How could men and women make these promises knowing so little of the future and of themselves? When Elsie's turn came her voice did not falter; her "I will" was clear and strong. A few minutes later it was all over, her grandfather had said, "Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder," and they stood there as man and wife. There was a little pause, and then with a pretty, childlike motion Elsie turned and put up her face to Alan to be kissed. With his dislike of any public display of feeling, Jean was sure that this was not to his taste. There was nothing else to be done, however, and he gave her what Virginia Morley afterwards characterized as "a most punctilious and irreproachable kiss." Then Elsie flew about the room in her gay fashion, without waiting for her friends to come to speak to her, finally selecting Dr. Reycroft as her prey.

"Come now, you have really got to congratulate me," she said. "You must at least give me your blessing."

"My dear young lady, I never give my blessing. I don't keep articles of that kind on hand."

"Then you must pay me a compliment."

"Such things are not in my medicine chest, either."

"I don't love you at all. How well Helen Gordon looks to-night! For a girl who is plain she has the most attractive face. She is really beautiful when she is much moved, whereas Jean — I can't understand you Reycrofts. Are you always as stern as you look? I wish you would tell me how you feel inside. As you won't give me your blessing and can't pay me a compliment, you might do that much for me. See how charmed Fred Hobbs seems to be with Helen! He 's been talking to her like a blue streak, and he 's usually such a silent, awkward fellow. Why, Dr. Reycroft, you look as vexed as if you were in love with her yourself. Oh, how do you do?" and she turned to greet George Morley. "I have one favor to ask of you, George, and that is that you will be as amusing as you can. Don't let anybody cry, and please go and talk to mamma, and I wish you 'd thaw Jean out. It is dreadful to belong to a family who take things so seriously. I don't know what I shall do to-night, with the doctor and mamma and Jean and my husband all on my hands. I should say, judging by the expression on Alan's face, that he was just going to the dentist."

A few minutes later George was talking to Jean, as she ate her ice-cream in a corner of the dining-room.

"Of all ghastly occasions, weddings are the worst," he said.

She assented.

"I never saw Elsie look so pretty," he continued.

"Yes, she is really beautiful, and she is so happy."

"I wonder how those two will hit it off," George ventured.

"I don't know. Of one thing we may be sure; nothing will happen at all as we think it will. Given a story, and you can have some idea of the way things will turn out, but in real life it is always the unexpected that happens."

"Does it? I wish it would."

"What do you mean?"

"I was n't thinking of Elsie and Alan; I always have a few little private wishes of my own on hand."

"Do you? You don't look like a person to indulge in daydreams."

A little later Jean was helping Elsie take off her wedding gown and put on her gray traveling dress; and soon after, the grave man and the child-like, laughing girl took their places in the shabby village hack. The light streamed out of the windows and fell on Elsie's upturned face. Clasped tightly in her hands

was her bridal bouquet of white roses. "Jean," she called, "I did not give you a rose. Come here."

Jean stepped up to the carriage, unconsciously making the central figure in the picture for one spectator. Now that the severity of her expression had relaxed, she looked very sweet and fair as she stood by the carriage door, her dark hair and pale pink gown contrasting with Elsie's bright hair and garb of Quaker gray.

Elsie tried to take one of the roses out of her bouquet. "I shall spoil my gloves," she said. "Here, Alan, just choose one for her, please. No, that is too wide open; take that little bud; it will last longer. Jean, I can't tell you how I hate to say good-by, but it won't be for long. You must come and make us a visit next winter; Alan and I are both depending on it, are n't we, Alan?"

He bowed gravely and handed Jean the rosebud. Then the two bony brown horses started, and amid a shower of rice and a ripple of laughter the hero and heroine of Jean's story were taken beyond her ken.

VII

The day after the wedding Jean awoke feeling that the romance of life had departed and that the dryest of prose was to succeed it. And yet, even then, she said to herself, "I shall get beyond this in time," for one of the compensations in having had an unhappy childhood is the knowledge thus early acquired that a monotonous stretch of road will not continue forever, and that it is possible to outlive dissatisfaction, disappointment, and even sorrow, in a measure. So Jean, although she was depressed, did not despair. She threw herself into her work with feverish eagerness, and after a period of low spirits, it again became her greatest interest. She had a pleased surprise at every turn of good fortune, for existence had been so disappointing at the start that she had no illusions to lose, but on the contrary was astonished to find life unfolding new possibilities.

It was almost exclusively a feminine world that she lived in at this time, both in Edgecomb and in Boston, where she went three times a week to paint and to give lessons in a friend's

studio, and she felt as much at home in it as a school-girl does in her dormitory. Her grandfather and her uncle supplied an agreeable masculine element, and made George Morley and his friends seem very unsatisfactory, for they were not half so good as her grandfather, on the one hand, or half so clever as her uncle, on the other. Jean formed two or three warm friendships with girls, and assured herself that women were far more satisfactory than men.

Her mornings, when she was not in Boston, were always spent in her studio, for it was one of her chief reasons for gratitude that she did not have to give one thought to household cares, but could be as free as the birds of the air. She would have felt this to be selfish, if Helen had not been one of the old-fashioned women with a genius for housekeeping. In the afternoon the sisters went for a long walk together, or for a drive with their grandfather, coming back in time to furnish five o'clock tea to their uncle James, or any other visitors who chanced to appear. Occasionally Jean had one or two girls from Boston to spend the night, or Helen and she would go to town to the semi-Bohemian festivities given by her friends, while their home evenings were always reserved for their grandfather. It was a life full of quiet pleasure, with the constant stimulus of interesting work, and

her love for her sister Helen, which was an absorbing passion, gave a zest even to her least eventful days.

Helen and Jean often read together, and there was enough difference in their cast of mind and education to make this always a fresh pleasure, on account of the discussions that were sure to follow. It was invariably the older sister who gave way to the younger in choice of subject, Helen learning to care for Browning and Meredith in company with Jean, while she undertook her more solid reading alone.

Helen had a genuine interest in everything and everybody, and was in consequence a universal favorite, whereas Jean was often considered cold and critical. To the few friends who knew her well, however, there was an especial charm in this attitude of aloofness to the general world; it was so flattering to be liked by her. There was one person to whom she revealed her fascinations more fully than to any other man, and this was her uncle James, but even he was frequently exasperated by what he thought her coolness of temperament. Helen was to him more lovable and feminine; indeed, Helen was the only woman he had ever known whom he considered free from the faults of her sex.

Dr. Reycroft could not recall the precise time when the possibility of marrying Helen Gordon

had first entered his mind. He believed it was about the period of Elsie's wedding, for he remembered on that occasion feeling a sense of unbearable injury when he saw Fred Hobbs carrying on a long and animated conversation with her. He had joined them and made himself so obnoxious that the young man had retired worsted from the contest. The idea had now become familiar enough to be regarded by him with a kind of hospitality. He kept it for dull days, when patients were ungrateful, and he was hard worked, when life seemed to contain all bitter and no sweet, or when he was ill. At such times it would occur to him that the constant companionship of so cheerful and sympathetic a woman, and one who understood him so thoroughly, might be refreshing. The next morning, however, he was sure to remember how trying it would be to have another person's happiness always on his mind. Occasionally in the evening, when he read his newspaper, a vision of a bright-haired girl, sitting on the other side of the fire, would come before him.

"It would be pleasant to have some human being with whom one could exchange an idea," he would say, but the next moment he would remember that she would be sure to wish to talk when he wanted to read, and he would give his tortoise-shell kitten an unusually affectionate

pat, for whatever his feline friend's faults might be, she always had the grace to hold her tongue. His sense of humor usually asserted itself before he had gone far in his musings. How the deuce a man who had always decried matrimony could ever have the face to offer himself seriously to a woman who was by no means destitute of a sense of humor puzzled him. And then Helen's astonishment would be so great. She was not in the least in love with him, and viewed in the light of dispassionate common sense he was obliged to admit that he saw no reason why she ever should be, for he was past fifty, and his singularly ugly face had grown no handsomer with the unidealizing march of years. Sometimes in the rare moments when he had leisure he amused himself by constructing whimsical offers such as these: "Helen, you once said you thought forty was an age when women did crazy things. When you are forty you might marry me. That will give us both six or seven years to get used to the idea." Or again, "Helen, I wish you would marry me; that is, I think I do. I feel so to-day; I may feel differently to-morrow. Only I don't want you to fancy that I am going to let you make any difference in my way of life, for I cannot have you on my mind. I merely want you where I can get at you easily."

Again he indulged in the idea of submitting his state of feeling frankly to her: "Helen, do you believe that a middle-aged man, who has never cared greatly for any one but himself, and who has n't the smallest idea of ever giving another person the foremost place in his affections, could ever make a girl happy, or, what is vastly more important, succeed in being happy himself?"

He could hear her answer in her cheery voice, "That depends upon the man and the girl, Uncle James."

"You and I, for instance?"

Sometimes Helen would answer, "Yes," but oftener she said, "No." When she said, "Yes," he was always conscious of an unpleasant sense of being tied down; when she said "No," he was extremely anxious to make her change her mind. So the months sped by without his putting these questions to the actual Helen. He went to see her oftener, however, and was even more severe in his strictures on fools.

The day that Susie Endicott's engagement to Fred Hobbs was announced, six months after Elsie's wedding, the doctor chanced to be calling at the parsonage.

"He 's made what might be termed 'Hobson's choice,'" he said.

"Uncle James, what a dreadful pun!" Jean

protested. "You would be scathing in your sarcasms if any one else had made it."

"It is no pun. I am merely stating facts. He was devoted to Elsie at one time, so her mother tells me, and then he tried to ingratiate himself with you, Jean, but you froze him, and then he was awfully sweet on you, Helen; you know he was."

"No, Uncle James, but there is no saying what would have happened if you had not frightened him away."

"Of course I frightened him away. You are so amiable that it is your impulse to do everything that is asked you, and I was n't going to risk your having the chance to say 'Yes' to him. If I were to ask you to marry me, I am by no means sure that your innate politeness would not induce you to say, 'Yes.'"

Helen and Jean both laughed immoderately at this speech.

"You had better not risk it," Helen observed, with a shake of the head.

Her considering him so entirely out of the question piqued his vanity. It is one thing to be aware of one's own weak points and have them seen by an imaginary Helen, but quite another when they are recognized by a real Helen.

It would be hard to state the exact process by

which Dr. Reycroft's feeling grew in strength; but given a man who is considerably more affectionate than he believes himself, and a charming woman, together with unlimited opportunities for seeing her, and there is at least an even chance of his growing very fond of her after the idea of marrying her has once entered his mind, a sense of humor being but an insufficient safeguard. Precisely this thing happened to Dr. Reycroft. It was astonishing, it was past all belief, but nevertheless it was true, that at fifty-two he found himself deeply in love with a woman whom he had known ever since she was a girl of sixteen, without the smallest idea of loving her. What made it the more incredible was the fact that she was not, like her sister, one of the women to whom added years bring an added grace. She had always been charming, from the moment when she first brought a ray of sunshine into his sombre life, — a slim young school-girl in her black gown, with her red braids hanging down her back.

"Why in thunder, if I were going to fall in love with her, could n't I have done it when she was eighteen?" he asked himself. Perhaps he could have made her love him then, if ever, by any flash of intuition, it had occurred to him to recognize the happiness that this charming girl, so different from other women, could have

brought into his life, for a young girl is apt to idealize a man older than herself who is good to her. But he had not been good to her; he had been absorbed in his profession and in himself. He wished some opportunity would occur which would enable him to show her his power of devotion. If only she would fall ill with scarlet fever, or, better still, smallpox, that would give him a field where his especial talents could shine! Helen, however, was always hopelessly well, so there seemed to be no possibility of his putting his affection to the proof. In the long run a man's care for a woman's health may be of greater value than his ability to write sonnets to her, or his sharing her enthusiasm for Browning or Meredith, but the doctor admitted to himself ruefully that a love for literature would serve him better at the present juncture.

One afternoon about a year and a half after Elsie's wedding, Helen and Jean were sitting together in the studio. It was growing dusk, and Helen drew the curtains and lighted the lamp. Then she put three spoonfuls of tea into the silver teapot.

"Helen, you did n't put in tea enough," said Jean. "Uncle James will be sure to come tonight. He has n't been here for a week. I can't think why he has stayed away so long. He must be very busy."

"Jean, I may as well tell you first as last that I had the misfortune to hurt your uncle's feelings the other day. We differed about something and had a discussion, and — well, I was n't very considerate, and I offended him. I am afraid he will not come to see me for a long time."

"How did you offend him, Helen?"

"I would rather not tell you anything more about it."

"But if I only knew what the trouble is I am sure I could set things straight. Uncle James has always been as fond of you as if you were his own niece, and I can't imagine anything really separating you."

"You could n't help me. It is one of those unfortunate things that only time can cure."

Jean racked her brains to think what the cause of difference could be, without getting a glimmering of the truth; the fact being that Dr. Reycroft had finally made the plunge and offered himself to Helen, who had refused him with the bald frankness that the most tactful of women are startled into sometimes.

"It is very provoking," Jean said, "and how we do miss him. He is a most missable person."

Helen was silent.

"It is curious that we should miss him so much," Jean went on, "for he is n't especially

amiable, or particularly unselfish or considerate, but he gives you the feeling that the world he lives in is made up of large issues; he is a man who lives in a man's world, and I like to feel myself in touch with something large and generous. Helen, if you are going to take Uncle James out of my horizon I shall quarrel with you; and I was just getting on so well with his portrait!"

"He will come to see you on afternoons when I am doing other things."

"But it is no fun to see him without you. You are my second self, and I don't half enjoy anything or anybody without you."

"Jean, you are a very foolish girl. I am not at all the person you think me."

"I don't care what you are. I love you from the red head of you to the slim, dainty foot of you, every line and curve, and I would n't alter a detail. It is the same with your mind and character, — they precisely suit me. You are better than any woman I know, but that is n't why I like you. I am only glad that the woman I love should chance to be so fine. I like you for your voice and your personality, for your turn of mind and for your warmth of heart, but beyond that for the something unexplainable that is you. I have seen pretty women and clever women that have n't given me anything of the sense of perfect contentment, entire satisfaction,

that you give me. And to think that you should be my sister! That the one person I should have chosen to live with, if I could have searched the wide world over, should have been put in the same house with me!"

It is probable that had Dr. Reycroft come in just then he would not have thought Jean cold. She had flung herself down on the rug by her sister's side and was pressing her hand.

"Helen, I don't believe any man ever loved a woman better than I love you."

Helen stirred uneasily. "A man's love is very different," she said slowly.

"Would you rather have it?" Jean asked jealously.

"Jean, I told you I was far from your ideal. I am afraid I should, if I could care for the man. It is terrible — I mean I should think it would be terrible — to win the love of a man whose affection you cannot return."

"I am not sure it would n't be worse to be able to return it," Jean said lightly. "Think of having one's happy, tranquil life invaded! But that will never happen to us, Helen. We are neither of us likely to marry. Helen, do say for once that you love me and are glad I am your sister and that nothing can ever come between us. I don't expect you to love me as I love you. There are some women who are born

with a talent for being loved, and others who are born with a talent for loving. I am in that class."

"Jean, you know I love you dearly."

"And nothing shall ever come between us?"

"Nothing shall ever come between us."

VIII

One snowy afternoon, ten days later, Dr. Reycroft came to Jean's studio. He had seen Helen going down the street half an hour earlier with a bag of work, evidently bound for the sewing-circle, where he supposed she would stay three hours at least.

Jean was still at work when her uncle arrived.

"Uncle James!" and a figure enveloped in a blue painting-apron flew across the room, and grasped his hand. "How glad I am to see you! You can't think how I've missed you! Come over here by the fire. How snowy you are! Here, you must take my seat of honor, — you are such a distinguished stranger," and she drew forth a carved oak armchair with a brown leather cushion.

Her uncle smiled in a contented fashion as he seated himself before the fire.

"Did you stay away in order to make the blessing of your presence more appreciated?" she asked him presently.

"Perhaps I may have had something of that sort in view."

"Well, you have succeeded. If I was ever doubtful before about the advantages of having an uncle, I know them all now."

She at once brought out his unfinished portrait, and surreptitiously began to work on it, but he was too observant for her.

"I thought your interest in me was a trifle professional," he remarked grimly.

"Please turn your head a little more. That is it. I want to work until it gets dark. You can talk as much as you like. Uncle James, you have several more gray hairs, — it is so long since you have sat to me, — and two new wrinkles."

"Jean, you need n't rub in the fact that I am an old man; I am only too well aware of it."

"Uncle James! I was only in fun. You are the kind of person who stays the same age always. You did n't seem very young when I first knew you, and I am sure you will never seem any older than you do now."

"Thank you, Jean. You have n't lost all the Reycroft sincerity."

"What have I said? I meant that you will never seem old. I like people a great deal better when they are not very young."

She was too reserved to approach the subject of his rupture with Helen, and so they talked of general matters, town news, and politics.

The doctor had been there perhaps twenty minutes when footsteps were heard coming upstairs, and Helen entered the studio followed by George Morley. "It is so stormy that only half a dozen ladies were there, so we did not stay," she explained, "and I met George, and persuaded him to come home with me. Oh, how do you do, I am very glad to see you." She approached the doctor as she spoke, but there was constraint in her manner as she shook hands with him.

It was snowing fast outside, and the whirling of the snow on the hillside and the swaying of the storm-tossed branches made a desolate prospect, while beyond on the horizon the white spire of the meeting-house crowned the summit of the hill. This bleak outlook served to accentuate the cheer within. The ruddy fire, the warm red of the walls, the artistic confusion of canvases and draperies, seemed the appropriate setting for the two hostesses. As Helen busied herself with the tea-kettle, and Jean with an apology went back to her painting, they might have stood for the typical woman of the past and of the future.

"I am so glad that Helen came back in time to make tea," said Jean, "for although I have had to do it so often, I am always afraid I shall make it too weak or too strong, or spill cream all over my gown."

"I came up on the train with Hobbs this afternoon," said George presently. "He and Susie seem to enjoy their new house greatly."

What Jean thought was, "Heaven deliver me from hearing any more about that house. Susie has only three objects of interest, — her house, her husband, and her clothes, and I am never sure what place to give Mr. Hobbs in the list." She could better bear to hear about her friend's house than of her husband, for the house was charming, which Mr. Hobbs was not. He was one of those persons who petrified Jean, and reduced her to his own level of irreproachable propriety and polite commonplaces. What she said, however, was, "The Hobbses' house is very pretty, and they seem delightfully happy."

"How she came to marry that pair of tongs I fail to see," grumbled the doctor, who did not share Jean's dislike of appearing ill-natured.

And by the way, is it not a little hard that those of our friends who go through life suppressing their thoughts should have the credit of so much greater amiability than those who give voice to them? The persons to be feared most, if we only recognized the fact, are not the Dr. Reycrofts, who speak more strongly than they feel, but the soft-voiced, gentle-mannered Jeans.

"For my part, I 'm glad to see one attractive

girl who was willing to marry an average man," owned George. "Fred Hobbs is an honest, straightforward sort of fellow, who has never had time to go into frills in the way of art or literature. But that does n't prevent his liking the sort of woman who has had leisure to cultivate herself."

"If you are talking about Susie Hobbs, you are a little off," the doctor remarked, "or else you 've had a more intimate acquaintance with that young lady than I have. I 've never seen her posing in the rôle of art critic or littérateur."

"No, but she 's a well educated, charming girl," George rejoined, "who might easily enough have thought herself too good for Hobbs, as she is in fact. We are all the inferiors, fast enough, of the best women in our acquaintance."

"Hold on there," broke in the doctor. "I 'm not. It may not be so picturesque to take care of the sick as it is to paint pictures, but it 's a darned sight more useful."

"But morally" —

"I 'm not with you, even there. A woman is driven through all the muddy places in life with her skirts well out of the mire; but is she for that reason morally the superior of the man who has had to go through the mud on foot? If he gets out of it without much of the smirch sticking to him, I say he 's her superior."

"I'm sure that Susie is happier as Susie Hobbs than she ever was as Susie Endicott," said Helen.

The doctor turned and gave her one of those withering glances with which he was wont to cow a refractory patient. "That is exactly like a woman," he observed irritably, "to dodge the main question and go off on a perfectly irrelevant side tack."

Helen changed color, and the tears rose to her eyes, but she resolutely drove them back.

"As I have the misfortune to belong to that inferior sex, I naturally do exasperating things, like a woman," she said quietly. "I agree with Dr. Reycroft," she continued steadily, "in thinking it is much more to the credit of a man, in politics or business, if he keeps fairly honest, than it is to the average woman to keep her standard high. And if some of the mud sticks to him it is not for us women who are peacefully out of the fray to criticise him too severely. It seems to me not so much a question of what we do, as of what we stand for, both with men and women. We women are handicapped by lack of opportunity, you men by unfavorable conditions. I am sure each sex ought to have a large margin of charity in judging the other; and I do believe with my whole soul that the conditions will continue to improve, and that the

time will surely come when the world will be a far happier place to live in." She suddenly stopped short, as if afraid of showing too much enthusiasm. "Will you have another cup of tea?" she asked, addressing the doctor. "I believe even you admit that women are usually successful in making tea."

A few minutes later, as Dr. Reycroft and George Morley made their way through the drifting snow, George observed, "It is strange that when we can never get along at all successfully without women, they can live so comfortably without us."

"They can, confound them!" said his companion.

"Take those two girls at the parsonage," George continued. "There seems to be nothing lacking to make their life complete. A woman of a lower type mentally and morally finds men necessary to her happiness. We have to marry the women who will have us, but there 's no good pretending that Hobbs can get as much out of life as if he 'd married Helen Gordon or —Jean Reycroft."

"Why don't you talk as fluently as this when you are with my niece?" the doctor inquired, as he gave him one of his penetrating glances.

"Your niece, for some reason or other, always

shuts me up. She has n't an exalted opinion of my conversational powers. Those women live in an ideal world," George went on presently. "It does one a lot of good to know them, but they give you a hopeless feeling of never being able to come up to the scratch. Of course they don't want to marry the average man, and why should they? He is n't good enough nor clever enough for them, and he is constantly offending their taste in less important ways."

"Yes," assented the doctor, "if a man chanced to come up to the new woman's standard morally and mentally, he would be sure to put himself out of her good books by the kind of necktie he wore, or by the awkward way in which he held his fork."

"They are right to demand more from men than they have had from them in the past," George said seriously, "and perhaps the next generation will have been taught from the start to be more worthy of women; but it 's a little rough on those of us who come in between the old state of things and the new. I wish it would occur to the new woman that she might improve the present condition by marrying the average man and giving him the chance to help her educate the new generation."

"It is all very well for those girls while they are young," said the doctor, "but after twenty-

five years more of this placid, greenhouse existence I should think it would get a trifle dull. They know nothing about life as lived by the masses, — its pitiful grind, its ugliness and squalidness, but with it all a kind of rough strength that comes from the contact with urgent practical problems."

The doctor stopped at the corner of a narrow side street.

"I 'm going down here to see a woman with five small children and a sick husband who drinks. They have n't much to eat or a great deal to wear, and they live in an ill-smelling basement. Altogether, it 's a different sort of place from Jean's studio. Good-night."

IX

THERE was great rejoicing in Edgecomb, for Elsie was coming home to spend the summer, — Elsie, who stood for joy, prosperity, and light-hearted gayety. No one altogether approved of Elsie Nichols, for Edgecomb was populated with New England consciences; but she was loved in an unreasoning, perhaps an unreasonable fashion, for it was impossible to withstand the charm of those blue eyes and that happy smile. To be sure, a little of Elsie went a long way; we should not care to live on confectionery, but after a period of abstinence most of us are pretty sure to welcome it with alacrity. Alan, who certainly could not be compared to confectionery, was coming on with his wife, to stay for part of the summer. It was two years since Jean had seen him, a period that seems short enough later in life, but which she felt had changed her from a girl into a woman. She and Helen went down to their aunt's house to help her get it ready for the travelers, and under their skillful fingers it soon became a bower of roses. They meant to go home before

the Nicholses came, but time sped so quickly that Jean was putting the last roses into a vase on the hall table when the door opened, and Elsie came in gayly, followed in a leisurely manner by Alan.

"How glad I am to see you, Jean," he said, and her heart began to beat quickly. But when she looked at him she found he had altered so much that he did not seem like the old Alan. It was absurd that such exterior trifles as a beard and eyeglasses should make so great a difference, for the inner man was doubtless unchanged. She had a pang of disappointment, however, and felt in a measure disillusioned, although as a compensation she knew instinctively that she should never feel ill at ease with him again, for illogically this decrease in his good looks seemed to put him more on her own level.

Elsie, meanwhile, had rushed into the parlor, where her mother and Helen were resting after the labors of the day, and was giving them her usual effusive greeting.

"Mamma dear, do you remember that it is exactly two years since we were married?" she said a few minutes later.

"It will be two years on the twenty-fifth," Alan amended.

Elsie went over to the bow-window and stood

with her back to the others. The sunlight fell on her bright hair and on the soft folds of her gray traveling dress. She was evidently lost in a tender reverie, for her usual volubility was checked. The spectators could not help being taken back two years in imagination.

"How much happier I am than I ever thought I could be then," was Jean's reflection.

"That is just where you stood when you were married, Elsie," her mother said. "Dear me! what a night that was! My only child about to leave me and go to the far west with a comparative stranger, and I so worn out with sorrow and fatigue, and the ice-cream not coming until the last minute, so that all through the service in the most solemn parts I would catch myself thinking, 'Will it come? And if it does n't come what *shall* I do?' And my darling was so gay through it all; I don't mean in the service, but afterwards; and she a mere child! Well, Alan, you certainly builded better than you knew, for she has turned out an excellent housekeeper."

"All the same, I think Alan was very rash to marry me," Elsie acknowledged, "for I had never kept house, much less cooked or sewed; yet even Annie is obliged to admit that I 'm a good housekeeper, is n't she, Alan?"

"She is."

"I can make the most delicious soups," Elsie went on, "and as for my salads, they are a dream, are n't they, Alan?"

"I have never tasted better salads," he responded heartily.

"Don't speak of them," said Elsie's mother; "you make my mouth water. Alan, I will say for you that she does not seem ever to have had one regret."

"Alan and I were saying this morning that we had nothing to regret, except that I am almost twenty-five. But as a man took me for eighteen on the train I don't think I need worry about my age yet. He thought Alan was my brother. I tell him if he will persist in wearing that horrid beard, people will take him for my father next."

As the two sisters were walking home together, Helen said: "Alan and Elsie seem very happy. It only shows there is something — attraction, the elective affinities, call it what you will — that puts our sensible calculations to confusion. It proves the superiority of our American system of free choice. I suppose Elsie was exactly the influence that Alan needed. It is plain to see that they are lovers still."

Edgecomb in general agreed with Helen, and the Nicholses were looked upon as a most de-

voted pair. When a woman sings her husband's praises in season and out of season, there is no doubt of her sentiments, and although Alan was not given to expression, it was considered impossible that the husband of such a charming wife should not be happy.

Jean's chances for seeing Alan and Elsie together were frequent. She was half ashamed to find herself studying them so closely; but she reflected that if a man has said over and over again that absolute truth is the only foundation for enduring happiness, and then marries a woman who seldom makes an accurate statement, he has brought this scientific scrutiny upon himself.

It was a great pleasure to have Elsie at home again; she would come flying up the studio stairs at all hours, just as she used to do, and talk nonsense by the hour together.

"Do you know," she confided to Jean one day, "Alan says one of the nicest things about marrying me is having you for a cousin."

"Elsie! that is a little too much."

"He did say it, truly, for I asked him if he did n't feel so and he said, 'yes.' He 's as fond of you and Helen as if you were his sisters. I wish you knew him really well. It 's astonishing how he has improved in little things. You should see the skillful way in which he gets my

sleeves into my jacket. You know there always was a charm about everything he did, when he was n't too much absorbed in his own thoughts. I won't let him talk about his old politics or business, so he has a pleasant change when he comes home. He 's a perfect dear. It 's queer that a man like that ever fell in love with me. Still, I don't know that it 's any queerer than that George Morley should be head over ears in love with you, when you are six times too good for him."

"Elsie, I grant that George is always a little in love with every girl he meets; but if you mean anything more than that, you are romancing."

"Indeed, I 'm not. I have seen him with you, and I teased him about you the other day, and he flared up. I 'm not going to tell you what he said, only he admires and respects you more than any girl he knows."

"Admires and respects me, possibly, but that is very different from being in love with me."

"Oh, you are so cold to him I expect he thinks it is n't of any use; but really, Jean, he 's a nice fellow, as men go, and he would make a very devoted husband; I don't see why" —

"Elsie, I will not have you talk to me like this; it 's perfect nonsense. I want to show you a set of illustrations I 've been making."

"I don't care about your illustrations. Why are they so much more exciting to you than men ever are? I find George Morley a great deal more interesting than your drawings. He 's manly, and he 's got a sense of humor, and he can pay nice compliments, and he has money, and he 's rather good-looking. He 's pretty freckled, to be sure, but he has beautiful blue eyes, and good teeth, too, in spite of their not being very even. He is very warm-hearted; the kind of man who can be tremendously in love, and" —

"Elsie, will you please stop?"

"I wish I were a man," said Elsie, coming over to her cousin and flinging her arms about her neck; "if I would n't take pleasure in thawing you out and making you tremendously in love with me!"

"Elsie, there are a few other things in life that are worth while besides being in love."

"I suppose so, dear. And that reminds me that I have come to see if you won't take tea with us to-night. Mamma is not going to be at home, and this morning Alan said he wanted me to ask you to come to tea."

Elsie's habit of attributing her own views to others was inconvenient, even for herself, for her friends were apt to take it for granted that what she said was inexact, whereas it was sometimes true.

"I suppose," Jean thought, "that she asked him if he did not want me to come to tea, and he said, 'No,' at first, and she teased him until he had to say 'Yes.' "

Whatever the case had been, Alan greeted Jean with marked cordiality.

"I am so glad you could come," he said.

He plunged below the surface at once, according to his old habit, and they were soon discussing books and life.

"I was never intended for a business man," he confided to her at last. "I should like to go back to the law, and be brought in contact with the kind of men with whom I really belong, but I can't, for I 'm too poor. You know how little one finds in the average business man? I am often hungry for congenial society. The constant grind of business makes me long for freer spaces."

"I tell Alan he ought to play tennis and learn to ride the bicycle," said Elsie.

He raised his eyebrows and paused for a moment. "The older I grow the harder I find it to make friends," he continued presently, "and the more solitary the intellectual life seems. There are plenty of men with whom one can smoke a cigar and discuss business or politics, but beyond this the average man has no ideas."

"I suspect that the fault is partly in you," Jean said gently. "You do not try to put yourself in touch with the average man."

"That is what I tell him," Elsie assented. "If he will look so sarcastic and severe, of course they are not going to give themselves away. Tea is ready now. I don't know whether you two intellectual people can consent to be sufficiently humdrum to eat a salad?"

Alan was as enthusiastic over the salad as his wife could desire, and for some time the talk flowed on in easy channels. Finally he said, "By the way, Elsie, I met old Mrs. Thomas down town to-day, with a little girl, who was leading her. She sent her love to you, and told me she was so sorry to hear that you were ill."

A look of comical dismay overspread Elsie's face.

"Oh, Alan, how unfortunate! Of course you said I was bloomingly well?"

"Why, yes. She seemed so concerned that I told her you were all right."

"You did not tell her I had gone on a row up the river, I hope?"

"I believe I did. Yes, I'm sure I did."

"Oh, dear, I don't see why something always happens when I try not to hurt people's feelings. You see," she added, turning to Jean, "I've been once a week, since I came back, to read to

old Mrs. Thomas. I feel so sorry for her because she is poor and blind, and I knew it would hurt her feelings dreadfully if she thought I gave up coming just for a row. As she goes out so little and is blind, it never occurred to me she could find out the truth."

Jean glanced at Alan involuntarily, but she felt that this was not fair, and immediately looked down at her salad.

"There was only one chance in a thousand it would turn out like that," Elsie proceeded.

"You can hardly expect to escape the coincidence the thousandth time," Alan remarked dryly.

"How sarcastic of you! We won't talk about truth any more," Elsie returned lightly. "I suppose even Alan isn't so truthful that he would like to have his thoughts photographed. Or are you so perfectly sincere in thought, word, and deed that you could bear the test, dear?"

He did not answer.

"Alan is evidently too truthful to say he could," said Jean.

She went away from the house feeling depressed. Her admiration for Alan's uncompromising truthfulness and for his high ideals had always been so great that his cynical toleration of Elsie's shortcomings troubled her. She had not liked his speech about coincidences. It

was as if he had said, "Charming women of your type tell a thousand little lies, more 's the pity; we don't expect truth from you." He seemed to have for his wife the indulgent, half-contemptuous affection that one gives to a recognized inferior, whereas Jean thought that to be true to his standards he should have tried to make Elsie take a broader outlook, while forgiving her her faults. Jean felt that he was charmed by Elsie's external attractions, but that he did not value sufficiently her rare power of devotion and her sweetness and unselfishness. Perhaps he had tried to make her take higher views, and had given up the task as impossible; but Jean was sure it was not hopeless, for she believed that every woman has in her the capacity for being better and nobler when under the influence of a strong love. Elsie had already become a notable housekeeper to please her husband, and Jean thought that her mind and character could have been modified, had he chosen to undertake the task.

She was confirmed in her views by a conversation that took place on the following Sunday, as she was walking home from church with the Nicholses. It was Alan's first appearance there since his return, and he had gone merely to please his wife, who was sure that his continued absence would hurt her grandfather's feelings.

Unfortunately for all concerned, it chanced to be a Sunday when Mr. Thorndyke exchanged with a newly-fledged divinity student. The sermon was on the future life. It was crudely written, and the ideas were material rather than spiritual. The preacher gave a glowing picture of a heaven with rubies and sapphires and emeralds adorning the streets, a kind of perpetual sunset glow transformed into substantial shape. Jean soon grew tired of listening, and made a sermon of her own. Her heaven was a place where all men and women were brave and true, and the ruling idea was the public good, — a heaven that might come upon earth if more men were like her grandfather, more women like her sister, and if the unfortunate beings born with a less happy inheritance would only make the most out of their lesser lives, each bringing his especial gift to the service of the whole.

It was one of those days when even a pessimist rejoices, for the sky was a cloudless blue, and the trees had not lost their early freshness, while flowers were blooming in all the gardens. As they came out from the old white meeting-house, with its high-backed pews, into this world of sunshine, there was an unusually thoughtful look on Elsie's bright face.

"Was n't that a beautiful sermon, Alan?" she asked half shyly.

"That sermon!" he exclaimed scornfully. "You don't mean to tell me you liked that sermon, Elsie?"

Poor Elsie looked as if she had received a blow in the face.

"I thought it was very beautiful and comforting," she said. "I always like something definite, and the young man seemed so sure that heaven was an attractive place."

"He talked a great deal of commonplace rubbish. His metaphors were mixed and every idea vulgar. How did you like the sermon, Jean?"

"I did n't care for the form," she confessed, after a moment's hesitation, "but the young man seemed in earnest, and a man who is in earnest can't help doing good."

"That is a dangerous doctrine," he returned; "the most mischievous anarchist is in earnest."

"It is a pity you gave up the law," said his wife.

She did not say anything further about the sermon, and Jean could see that whatever aspirations it had aroused in her were checked by Alan's sarcasms. He pursued the subject at length, and, after having entirely demolished the preacher's arguments, asked Elsie if she did not realize now what a poor sermon she had heard.

"Oh, yes. Of course it was very commonplace and not literary at all."

"And don't you see that such a material idea of heaven is a low one? Don't you think there is something more worthy of respect in the position of the honest doubter, who refuses to believe on insufficient evidence? Of course you don't, though, or you could n't have liked that sermon."

"We won't talk any more about the sermon," said Elsie. "I 've no doubt if you were a minister you would preach a great deal better one."

A little later, when Alan had overtaken a friend and walked on with him, Elsie said: "Jean, it is very unfortunate to have an inferior mind, when your husband is uncommonly clever, because it makes you seem like such a fool. Now that sermon made me feel as if I 'd like to be good. I suppose you won't believe me when I tell you that I have a thoughtful mood now and then."

"Indeed I will, Elsie."

"Thank you; you are more comforting than Alan. He gives me the feeling that I am such a hopeless case there is no use in my trying to improve. He thinks I 'm all right just as I am, and he does n't care for women to be too intellectual. It 's a compliment, of course, but some-

how it makes me too satisfied. When I 'm with you and Helen, I always wish I were like you. Do you think people can ever really change ? "

" I 'm sure they can to some extent."

" Do you suppose I could be serious like you, and fond of reading, if I read a lot, and awfully truthful and conscientious and high-minded ? "

It was hard for Jean to refrain from smiling, but she had determined that she at least would take Elsie seriously.

" I am sure there is no use in trying to be like other people," she replied. " All we can do is to try to make the most of our individual selves. I was thinking of that very thing this morning. I know I can never be unconscious and simple like Helen, or so good and lovable, but I should like to turn my very faults to some account. My miserable self-consciousness and my taste for introspection and analysis ought to help me to understand other people, and to make me a better artist, perhaps, than if I were the other kind of person. And so I am sure your talent for being agreeable could be turned to great use. I am glad you want to be truthful ; I think we all ought to try to tell the truth in love, and you are so loving, Elsie. I have often wished I had your power of making people care for me."

" You are as bad as Alan. I don't want to

be told I 'm fascinating. I want you to say I have a fine, original mind, and that I could make a lawyer or a doctor, if I chose. By the way, Jean, will you let me read Bryce's 'American Commonwealth' aloud to you? Alan tells me I could never wade through one chapter of it, and I want to give him a surprise."

Elsie was not the companion Jean would have selected to read Bryce with, but she was determined to assist her in her attempt at self-improvement. It was agreed before they parted that Elsie was to come every afternoon to the studio, to read to her cousin, while she was washing her brushes and putting her room in order.

"Well, here I am," Elsie said brightly, the following afternoon. "I 'm sorry to be so late, but I met Susie Hobbs, and she took me for a little drive in her phaeton. Her baby is too sweet!"

After a quarter of an hour given to a discussion of the Hobbs family, Jean finally insisted that her cousin should begin the reading.

"I 'm going to skip the introductory chapter, for it 's pretty long," said Elsie, "and begin with 'The Nation and the States.' 'A few years ago the American Protestant Episcopal church was occupied at its annual convention in revising its liturgy,' " she read impressively.

"Jean, I have always wanted to be an Episcopalian. I do so love the service and the choir boys. I have seriously thought of going to the Episcopal church in Minneapolis, except I know it would trouble grandfather; however, perhaps he never would find out about it, only Alan would be sure to tell him. Do you think it is right to go to the church where you can get the most good? Or do you believe it is more important not to hurt the feelings of your family? Alan hates the Episcopal church; but as he never will go with me any way, I tell him I don't see what difference it makes to him where I go. What do you think?"

"I think it is a question each person must decide for himself, Elsie."

At least a quarter of an hour was taken up in a discussion of the respective characteristics of the Episcopal and Orthodox church. Finally Jean suggested mildly that if they were to accomplish any more reading that afternoon they had better be about it. Elsie read steadily for a couple of pages, but Bryce's comparison of the national government to a large building and a set of smaller buildings, standing on the same ground, yet distinct from each other, was too much for her self-restraint, for it reminded her of Washington, which she and Alan had recently visited.

"My dear," she said, "you never saw such a beautiful city, especially at night, when all the people have such a festive air, as if they were living just to go to the theatre or a ball. It is a perfect dream. I should love to see it with you. Alan was n't any good. He dragged me all over the stupid Smithsonian Institution and the National Museum, and the tedious old Patent Office, when I was longing to drive about the city, and go to one of the receptions at the White House. Alan would n't hear of it, because he said there would be such a rabble there, as it was for the public. I love the public! I think it is fascinating! I never was made to be an aristocrat. Dear me! There is Alan! Surely I have n't been here a whole hour?"

"No, you were late."

"I 'll try not to be late next time. I will just finish this chapter, for there is only a page. I like short chapters, don't you? I feel as if I 'd accomplished such a lot."

She went over to the open window and called, "Alan, I 'll have to keep you waiting a minute, for I 'm just finishing a most interesting chapter in 'Bryce's Commonwealth.'"

"What, Elsie?"

"'Bryce's Commonwealth,'" she repeated proudly. "Jean and I are reading it together. He is laughing, the disrespectful man! Why

should n't Jean and I read Bryce if we want to?"

"You should. Please give Jean my congratulations."

"You don't think I mean to go on with it? To punish you I shall make you wait until I read another chapter. You can sit on the steps until I come down, or else go in and see grandfather. We can't have you interrupting us."

"I can't wait."

"I must at least finish this chapter."

Elsie read the page hurriedly, and then ran downstairs to join her husband.

"Alan is going to make some duty calls with me this afternoon," she called back to Jean. "It is so good of him, for he hates to make calls. Good-by, dear. I'll come again to-morrow. Oh, I forgot; I'm going up the river to-morrow, and Wednesday is my afternoon for reading to old Mrs. Thomas. I'll come Thursday afternoon, and I'll be sure to be prompt."

After two or three more readings Jean did not so much wonder that Alan had found it a little difficult to make Elsie over.

X

Nevertheless, as Jean's professor in chemistry used to say, although the experiment had failed, the principle remained the same. She was confident that Elsie had her more serious side. When Jean first discovered that she herself was not the most important person in the universe, and turned her powers of analysis upon others, she found that each human being has a higher as well as an every-day self, and that there is a spiritual significance even to material things. These well-known facts came to her with the freshness of a new discovery, and transformed, not only the actual world in which she lived, but likewise art and literature. She began to express something of this thought in her painting; and being still exceedingly reserved, she rejoiced to think that no one would see any revelation of her inmost feelings in the impersonal medium of paints and canvases. She smiled when she took up her brushes to think how much of her creed she could put even into an old gray house with hollyhocks growing against it. She could paint it without enthu-

siasm, but with such technical skill as she possessed, or she could try to show something of her delight in the exquisite harmony of color, something of her keen pleasure in the light and atmosphere, something of her joy in life. And if she felt this even in regard to material objects, how much more did she feel it when she tried to paint human faces with souls behind them.

Strange to say, her chief patrons in Edgecomb were the Morleys, who certainly knew and cared no more for art than any of her neighbors, but who from the start had been friendly to her career. It troubled her to have them buy so many of her sketches, until she reflected that poor as her pictures might be they were infinitely better than any of the other "artistic gems" which they possessed.

It was with Virginia Morley's portrait that Jean had her first genuine success. She was in despair when she received this order, for Virginia had none of the points that made a face interesting from her standpoint. She was fine looking, in a florid, matter-of-fact way, but when compared with a woman like Helen, Virginia was what a full-blown red peony is to an English violet. Jean was fond of dividing the world into idealists and Philistines; and although Virginia amused her, she had always thought of her as a Philistine of the Philistines. But now

it occurred to her that even she must have her other side, and that it might be possible to paint her so as to soften her objectionable points. Jean soon discovered that whenever Virginia talked of George, her usual caustic comments stopped, her face grew softer, and her whole manner changed. Yes, even Virginia had a little corner in her heart that was sacred from the broad glare of day. She loved, she idealized her brother. So Jean painted Virginia in her quietest gown, with that softened expression on her face, and both artist and sitter were surprised by the result.

"I did n't know I was so refined," Virginia said one day, with her accustomed frankness. "You 've made me look like a lady."

George was delighted with the portrait when it was on exhibition in Jean's studio, where, indeed, it made quite a sensation.

"It is so like Virginia, and yet it is so distinguished looking," was the way in which her friends put it, and more than one woman resolved to have her likeness painted, as soon as she could save the money for it; so that Jean, who had had no thought of worldly wisdom, suddenly found her worldly prospects improving.

"That 's a stunning picture of you, Virginia," George said, as the brother and sister were walk-

ing home after the exhibition. "I wish you would wear gray more. It suits your style."

"If you expect me to wear gray gowns all my life because they suit my style, you are very much mistaken. I love bright colors, and I shall continue to be characterized by girls like Jean as 'that over-dressed, unrefined Virginia Morley' to the end. I'm not so obtuse as not to see what she thinks of me. 'Rather vulgar! The kind of person one would not want for a friend, still less for a sister-in-law; but with a kind heart and devoted to her brother, who is a thoroughly commonplace young man.'"

"Don't, Virginia! You have imitated her voice so exactly that I feel as if she really had said those things."

"No, she is too discreet and too well-bred to say such things, but she thinks them; you may depend upon it she thinks them."

"What did you talk about while she was painting your portrait?" he asked, with assumed carelessness.

"You, chiefly."

George's change of countenance was not lost upon his sister.

"You need not flatter yourself that our conversation was because of her interest in you, my poor boy. She merely found that when she pulled a certain string her doll began to talk

and had a cheerful expression, so she kept on pulling it. It is the same principle which makes the photographer, after ramming your head into a vise, say, 'Now look pleasant, ma'am; think of something agreeable in your past life. Think of beefsteak, or ice-cream, or whatever you like best.' Sometimes I hate that girl."

"Sometimes I do," George confessed, with a little shamefaced laugh.

"You 'd better cultivate the feeling. It will be good for you in the end. There is no use in your thinking of her. She has no idea of marrying. Marriage would seem to her very much like Virginia Morley, — 'well enough if you happen to like anything so matter-of-fact, so commonplace, but just a little vulgar.' "

"Virginia!"

"As for anything like strong emotion, passion, she would think it out of taste merely to speak of it."

"You don't do her justice," George began hotly.

Virginia laughed.

"And the worst of it is," he continued, "you have such a way of putting things that I feel as if you really meant them. It seems as if you had received a fiat from on High to tell you they were literally so. I am sure she could care tremendously for a certain kind of man, but he 'd have

to be, not only a long sight better than the rest of us, but very clever and intellectual and" —

"Oh, as far as that goes, I suppose she did care as much as that kind of woman can care, for" —

"Don't say it, Virginia; you have n't any right" —

"I never have breathed it to any one, but I know, as well as if I 'd been told, that she did care for your nameless friend. That kind of woman always makes a hero of that sort of bloodless automaton."

"You are too hard on poor old Alan; he 's a very good fellow."

"Did I say he was n't good? My dear boy, he could spare enough virtue to keep you and me going for several years. Do you call it severe of me to hint that he is a trifle glacial? Jean, however, admires his coldness and considers it refinement. I hate her."

"No, you don't."

"The worst of it is that she is so sweet, so feminine, and entrancing through it all," cried poor Virginia. "I believe I am as much in love with her as you are, but I can tell you it was an unlucky day for both of us when she came into our lives. All the same, I 've given her an order to paint your portrait, fool that I am! I can't understand how any woman you

love can help caring for you, George, but none of the things that please other women count with her. What she wants more than unswerving love and devotion is sympathy with her tastes. I should say you showed a certain practical sympathy by buying her pictures."

George abruptly changed the subject. Jean was like his religion, — something he seldom spoke of, but which was very sacred. He had always been too much of a favorite with women to be insensible to the fact that he had a certain charm, but he was very humble and modest nevertheless, and he agreed with his sister that none of the things which counted with other women would count with Jean. And indeed why should they? He loved her the better because they did not.

Alan Nichols was not as pleased with Virginia's portrait as was the rest of Edgecomb, and he gave Jean his views with his accustomed frankness.

"You haven't told the truth," he said. "You 've idealized her."

"I 've only painted her at her best. To me that is nearer the truth than to paint her at her worst; don't you think so?"

"No. I suppose the truth which we both pretend to be aiming at lies halfway between our friend in his most aggressive, aggravating

mood, and our friend when he is showing his best side to the woman he loves. The real man is a composite photograph of the two. If you believe in truth in art, it is as untrue to paint Miss Morley in a quiet gown, and with that subdued expression, as it would be to describe me as a man who saw only the good in human nature, because I once said that Helen is an ideal woman. We can't alter facts by blinking at them, or women by painting them as saints in gray. Virginia Morley will go home to-night, and put on one of her harlequin gowns, and talk to George all through dinner about the soup and the plumber."

"You don't see her at her best. She 's very bright and racy. Perhaps you are one of the persons with whom she feels she has only the soup and the plumber in common. Most women are afraid of you, and if you expect the soup and the plumber from them, that is what you get."

"I certainly do not get it from you," he observed.

He stood for some time with his hands behind him, studying the portrait critically. Finally he turned and looked steadily at Jean. "I wish you would paint my picture," he said. "I should like to see you bring out all the hidden meaning in my soul, but unfortunately I have n't

the money to squander on having my soul's depths explored."

"And I can't afford the time to make you a free gift of your soul's depths."

She looked half absently at his tall, straight figure and strongly marked face. He was handsome still, in spite of the disfiguring beard and eyeglasses, and gave the impression of being a man of unusual power. She was thinking that he would make a stern judge, and wondering if, with all his penetration, he knew human nature as well as less clever men know it, for so many sensitive persons shrank into their shells at his approach.

"Well, what have you discovered?" he asked, with a smile. "You have been staring at me as if you were determined to find out all my secrets."

"I beg your pardon. I always forget that my friends aren't pieces of furniture. I was thinking how much more pleasure you would have if you tried to see the best in people, and how many more friends you would make."

"Thank you for the suggestion. I have no doubt if I were to tell enough polite lies, I might have the felicity of being considered charming by a vast quantity of bores. By the way, you are very ungrateful, considering that you are one of the few I do like."

A visit from Alan inevitably depressed Jean. She was always sensitive to personal atmosphere, but no one had ever exerted so strong an influence upon her as he had. He was fond of talking philosophy and politics with her, and of giving her his gloomy views of life. The worst of it was that he was cleverer than she, and had seen more of the world. How could she say that his pessimism was not in closer accord with facts than her optimism?

Her extreme interest in human nature, which gave her the desire to pull to pieces the mind of any person who puzzled her, as if it had been a flower, led her to find him always a fresh and fascinating study. Whether he was really as cold as he seemed, or a man with great feeling underneath; whether he was a pessimist for personal reasons, or because he had looked at life in a broader way than she had; whether he was happy in his marriage, or whether Elsie was a disappointment to him, — all these and many other questions continually arose in Jean's mind. With all Alan's frankness there was a wall of reserve which she instinctively did not try to pass, and one subject upon which he never touched; namely, Elsie.

Jean stood for a long time looking at Virginia's portrait, after Alan left her, and felt the justice of what he had said. She had not told

the whole truth, but she had told the truth as far as she had gone; she had told the truth in love. Was he right in his views? Or was she right in hers? For the moment she believed that he was right, and life suddenly grew matter of fact and dull. She opened the window to get a breath of fresh air. The wind had suddenly swept around to the east, and there was the hint of a coming storm. She usually rejoiced in the bracing quality of the east wind, but now she shut the window with a shiver. The world was cold without, and her studio seemed dreary within. There was no beauty anywhere.

XI

The Nicholses went back to the West the first of August; for when it came to the point, Elsie could not bear to let Alan go home without her, and the following week Jean began George Morley's portrait. She missed Alan more than she had thought possible, but had at the same time a distinct sensation of relief. George was so sunny and entertaining that she felt like a child let out of school. In the great outside world politics might be corrupt, sinners might flourish, and the righteous be oppressed; but she was happy in her little corner of the world, and the firm conviction was bound up with her whole being that, looked at largely, everything was for the best, and that all things in the long run work together for good. George was not much given to abstract discussion; he preferred to talk about the bicycle. Helen and Jean were learning to ride, and the room rang with laughter, as the girls set forth in glowing colors their misadventures. Sometimes Jean was in a more serious mood, and put one of the questions that she and Alan had discussed, to

George, and he always had a practical answer ready.

"Do you think that most business men are selfishly bent on advancing their own interests at the expense of their neighbors?" she once asked him.

"In a way, yes. In another way, no. There has to be competition in the nature of things, but it does n't necessarily make men selfish. I 've seen many acts of almost quixotic kindness done among business men."

"I hate to think of all the suffering there is in the world," she said on another occasion.

"Don't think of it, then," he returned promptly.

"But I feel like a child when I shut my eyes to the realities of life and let myself be irresponsibly happy."

"The sad things come soon enough without our seeking them out," George said succinctly.

"I don't know any class who are as great a comfort to their friends as the irresponsibly happy," said Helen. "For that reason it always does me the greatest good to see Elsie; she and Alan seem so contented."

"I should n't call Alan irresponsibly happy," Jean suggested dryly.

"No, but he is as happy as it is possible for a man of his temperament to be."

Jean did not find George so easy to paint as his sister had been, and this was a disappointment, for his face was far more interesting. She grew more and more discouraged as the summer went on; and even Helen, who was usually present to help amuse the sitter, owned that although the picture was very charming it had one drawback, — it did not look like George.

"You never are twice the same," Jean announced to the model one day. "Just as I think I have begun to get a likeness, you come in looking like an entirely different person."

"Whom do I look like to-day?" he inquired.

"A discouraged man who is down on his luck, — some one who has never succeeded in anything and has the world against him."

"That is just the way I feel."

"You poor thing! It is the hot weather. I feel so, too. I hoped you would not come to-day, for it is so hot I don't feel in the least like painting."

She held her head back a little, and looked first at George and then at her canvas, and then back to him.

"It is thoroughly bad. You would be easier to do if you did not look the embodiment of all prosperity and gayety when you smile, and so different when you are serious."

Jean worked away for some minutes in silence, and finally put down her palette and brushes. "Don't you think that you had better go home?" she asked bluntly. "I can see that it will be perfectly useless for me to try to paint."

George laughed somewhat ruefully. "I 'll go if you turn me out, but I 'm hot and tired, and I should like to stay and see you for a while."

He could not understand how Jean could be so utterly blind to the strength of his feeling for her.

"Of course you may stay, and I 'll make you some lemonade if I can find any lemons. I 'll try to alter your mouth first, and perhaps Helen will get back before we are ready for the lemonade. I am a hopelessly undomestic person, and I would rather paint than make it, even on this hot day."

She had never looked more charming than she did now, with the light coming in through a network of green oak-leaves and falling on her slim figure and the graceful folds of her white dimity gown, with the pink ribbon around the waist. The bodice was cut down at the neck and had a white frill around it edged with lace, and she had pushed the sleeves up to her elbows.

There was an indescribable gentleness and

languid softness about her this afternoon that made her seem less unattainable than usual, and George had a mad desire to seize her in his arms and kiss her.

"Have you ridden the bicycle lately?" she asked, breaking the silence.

He gave a short laugh. "Yes, I rode ten miles last night."

Jean was very absent-minded after this and said little. She was thinking of a letter she had received from the Nicholses. It had been begun by Elsie and finished by Alan.

"I am back in the world of business again," he had written, "and those afternoons in your studio seem like a stream of cool water in a thirsty land. I am glad you believe in the inherent goodness in human nature. Just at present I find it hard to keep my faith in it. What have you done that the world should be so refreshingly kind to you? And how at your age can you still have the simple creed of a child?"

Jean had not realized before that her optimism might have as strong an interest for him as his pessimism had for her. She felt flattered, and yet the letter was so fraught with his personality that it depressed her almost as much as his actual presence would have done.

"Do you think that life is an unsatisfactory thing?" she asked George suddenly.

"In some ways, very."

"Oh, please don't say that! I expected you to keep up my spirits by saying that you enjoy it immensely."

"I do sometimes."

"When you are bicycling, for instance."

"Yes, although the bicycle does not mean the sum of human happiness to me."

"It is the sum of human happiness to me," she said lightly. "At least it is on a cool day and on a level road. I 'm in love with my bicycle. What is there in the world that is nicer?"

"Being in love with some one who cared about you would be nicer," he answered gravely.

Jean changed color and was vexed with herself for her careless speech. She looked at George half furtively, and said with decision that bicycling appealed to her a great deal more. She began nervously to make some corrections in her picture, and wished that she were not always so awkward when she was embarrassed.

"Helen ought to be back directly, and then we can have some lemonade," she observed presently. "How stifling it is here! If you will open the west window, too, George, we shall be better off, if it does n't make too much of a gale."

He obeyed her, and there was immediately such a commotion in the room that some photo-

graphs were swept from the mantelpiece and whirled across the floor.

"You 'll have to shut the window," said Jean.

He did so, and then mechanically began to collect the photographs. One of them lay just at her feet. As he stooped to pick it up, his hand grazed against her dress. With an irresistible impulse he seized the hem of her gown and pressed it to his lips.

"Oh, don't," said Jean, drawing back breathlessly.

"Forgive me," he begged huskily. "I did n't mean to, but I love you so I could n't help it."

"You must n't," she said brokenly. "It could never come to any good. I 'm so sorry. I had begun to think of you as one of my best friends, and now — I can't see you any more if you are going to — unless you " —

"I will not make a fool of myself again, if that is what you mean," he returned shortly. "I care for you too much to lose your friendship. You 've always been too good to me. I have sometimes wondered if you would want to be friends with me if you knew just what I am. I have done a lot of things I should hate to have you know about, — you have such high ideals, — and yet sometimes I feel as if I ought to tell you, for I don't like to have you think me better than I am ; but I do want to be good."

"I would rather you did n't tell me," she said gently. "I should like you just the same, for I like the kind of man you are, and I know you want to be good. I like you so much that I am sure I could never — care for you," she explained helplessly. "I have known you too well. You are like a favorite cousin. Here comes Helen. Now we can have some lemonade."

The next morning Jean received the following note from George: —

DEAR JEAN, — I hope you will forgive me and prove your trust in me by going on with the portrait.

Sincerely yours,

GEORGE MORLEY.

She answered promptly: —

DEAR GEORGE, — It was more my fault than yours, for I was so stupid. I shall expect you this afternoon, as usual. I am anxious to make a success of the portrait, for Virginia's sake.

Yours sincerely,

JEAN REYCROFT.

George expected to find Helen at the studio the next afternoon, and he was grateful to Jean for showing her entire forgiveness and confidence by seeing him alone. They talked of the

bicycle and the weather. After a time Helen came in and made them some lemonade. Everything outwardly was just as it had been before, except the portrait, which was rapidly becoming a hopeless failure. After two more sittings Jean was obliged to turn its face to the wall. Some day she promised herself that she would paint the canvas over with a bit of still life and give it to Virginia.

XII

"JEAN," Helen said one afternoon a fortnight later, "I wish you could care for George Morley; the poor boy seems so wrapped up in you."

The sisters were sitting by the river bank, Helen patiently holding a sun-umbrella over Jean, who was sketching.

"What makes you think he cares for me?" Jean asked. She had resolved that for George's sake, no one, not even Helen, should suspect what had happened.

"I know it because he told me. I've fancied it for a long time, but the other night when he came and you were out, he stayed on, hoping that you would come back, and — well, he told me the whole story. I suppose he had to tell some one."

Jean worked on in silence, but with heightened color. She was very formidable when she was in one of her unresponsive moods. She regretted them, but it did not occur to her that she could help them, and she had no idea how much they tried her friends, for she supposed they realized that they were merely one form of shyness.

"The foliage is beginning to change," said Jean at last, pointing to the scarlet branch of a maple. "It is turning very early, for it is only the tenth of September. I 'm sorry to have the autumn come."

"I can't let the chance to speak go by," Helen thought. "I must n't be such a coward."

"Jean," she said, "I know you are not really cold, and so I can't see why, when a man is so much in love with you, it apparently makes no impression on you, — such a dear fellow too! I should think it would soften your heart to him, for you are human, if you do like to paint."

There was absolute silence on Jean's side, and Helen felt more and more snubbed.

"Don't you think that you could care for him in time if you tried?" she went on, for she knew that Jean was too well-bred to ignore a direct question.

"No, Helen, I am sure I could n't."

"But you are fond of him already in a certain way."

"Yes."

"You have it in your power to be so much to him. I believe there is nothing you could n't do for him. He did not ask me to speak to you," Helen added hastily, seeing an ominous look on Jean's face, "but I felt as if I must. I don't think it often happens that a woman is

loved in just the unselfish way in which he loves you. I am sure you are making a mistake that you will regret all your life. When you are ten years older, you will find that art is not all you need to make you happy. You will wish then that you had formed close human ties and had a home of your own."

"Don't, Helen. Forgive me, dear, but I can't bear to hear you speak so. What do I want of any closer human ties and a home of my own when I have you? I may be very unwomanly, but the mere idea of giving up my free existence is unbearable. I would only marry if I were so carried away by my liking for some one that I could n't live without him; but George Morley! He is utterly out of the question, utterly!"

Helen grew more and more uncomfortable, but she felt there was another thing that she must say.

"It is n't as if life would always go on as it is now," she ventured. "Changes must come, and when they do you will wish — you may regret"—

"No, Helen, I shan't."

"I don't see why so many girls feel as you do," Helen finished lamely. "It used to be so different."

"Helen," said Jean coldly, "we will go home now; I 've spoiled my sketch."

Helen felt herself in disgrace during their silent walk. She longed to know what was going on in her sister's mind; the door, however, was not only shut, but also barred and bolted. "Now if she had only asked me about her uncle James, I should have been very glad to tell her everything," Helen thought; "but as it is, I can't, for she is so wholly unsuspicious of what has happened."

The fact was that poor Helen had been having a most disturbing eight months, in spite of their apparent monotony. Nothing had ever given her such pain as having to tell Dr. Reycroft that she did not love him well enough to marry him, and she wondered if her sister were suffering in the same way now, but was too proud to show it. Helen felt sure she could have cared for George, had she been in Jean's place, for it is much easier to love in the abstract than in the concrete. There were many excellent reasons that prevented her loving Dr. Reycroft; and yet if he had been ten years younger, and she had not begun by looking upon him as an uncle, if he had had another face and figure and a different disposition, if, in short, he had been wholly unlike what he was, how well she could have loved him! She was so fond of him, too, that it made it all the harder. It had never occurred to her that her refusal would cause a break in

their intercourse; and when he began to avoid her, and to treat her, on the rare occasions when they met, with studied indifference, she was pained and bewildered. She had not supposed him to possess such an unforgiving temper. The worst of it was that she had never realized before that her intercourse with him was the most stimulating feature of her life. She wondered if she could have refused him in such a way as to have kept him for her friend, and was vexed with herself for feeling so sorry for him when he was so unkind to her; but she was too keenly sympathetic not to regard unrequited love in the light of a tragedy. Helen did not know that Jean, after having summarily despatched the subject of George Morley, was secretly longing to return to it, but was too proud to introduce the theme; not that she had changed her mind, but that she wanted the satisfaction of talking the whole affair over. So the weeks passed, while the sisters continued to lead a tranquil outward life and a troubled inward one, and were together the greater portion of every day, yet farther apart than when Jean had been across the seas. No matter how intimate two reserved New England women may be, there is at least one corner in the mind of each where the other does not dare to enter.

As the months went by and the doctor con-

tinued to go to the parsonage at an hour when he knew Helen had other engagements, she grew hungry for a sight of him, and one Thursday evening, on the chance of seeing him, excused herself from her whist club and stayed at home. He came as usual, and talked to Jean and her grandfather, looking over Helen and through her, but never at her. Once he addressed a remark to her, and when she answered him, he immediately contradicted her. After this her devotion to whist never flagged.

One day in December, as Helen was returning from a solitary walk just at dusk, the doctor, who was driving, overtook her. "Now he will have to offer to take me home," she thought, but he passed her with only a slight inclination of the head. The tears came into her eyes. It made her feel so far from him, — she who used to be so near. The very marketmen would have offered her the courtesy of a "lift," and he, her best friend, was passing her without a word. Apparently the doctor repented his first impulse, for he checked his horse a moment later, and waited until Helen came up to him.

"Perhaps you would like me to take you home, as it is getting late?" he suggested coldly.

"No, I thank you," she returned with spirit. "I am out for exercise, and I would rather

walk." Then as he drove on she regretted her pride.

When the winter was far advanced, a time came at last when the doctor called on a Wednesday evening, a night that he was sure of finding Helen at home. On this occasion he spoke to her five times and snubbed her only twice. He looked over her and through her, but he looked at her once and smiled. Helen smiled back again. His glance seemed to say, "It is all right."

A morning or two later he called at an hour when he knew that Jean would be busy in her studio, and asked for Helen. He was shown into the little conservatory, where she was watering her plants. She wore a cotton gown in the mornings all the year round, and to-day she had on a lilac gingham, a little faded, but scrupulously neat. Helen had a green watering pot in her hand, with which she was giving some violets their morning shower-bath. She was very graceful as she stood there with her head a little drooped, and seemed like a larger specimen of the same family.

"Good morning. Do you want to see Jean?" she asked, coming forward to shake hands with the doctor.

"No. I came to see you."

"Won't you sit down?" And she pointed

to a green wooden chair. "I know you won't mind if I go on watering my plants."

The doctor evidently had something on his mind, for he fidgeted uneasily. Helen thought that he had come to apologize, and to propose that they should be friends once more.

"It is perfectly delightful to have you drop in again in this way," she ventured. "I have missed you very much."

"I have dropped in a good deal, but you are usually not here," he said coldly, and she saw that he preferred to ignore the past.

"I 'm glad it was only accidental," Helen assured him, with a little smile, "for you came so often when I had regular engagements that I began to think you tried to avoid me."

The doctor saw the smile and laughed outright. "Well, at any rate we may as well be friends now, for there is something I want you to do for me."

"Something" —

"Yes, I want you to be one of the managers of the new hospital."

Helen felt a pang of keen disappointment. "It is only his hospital he cares about and not me," she thought. "I have never done anything of the kind," she began, "but if you think I could be of use" —

"I am sure of it."

They discussed the hospital for half an hour, and then the doctor rose.

"You will come again?" Helen said with all her former friendliness. "You will forgive me and go back to your old ways?"

"I was not aware that I had anything to forgive."

Helen felt as if she must have imagined that he had asked her to marry him, or else that he had forgotten the fact; perhaps he had, for he was a busy man and absent-minded in the small affairs of life.

"Those violets are very sweet," the doctor said, standing irresolutely, as if there were something else he wanted to say.

"Yes, would you like some?"

"No. What should I do with violets?"

"I 'm sure I can't tell you. They certainly do not seem much in your line."

"They are not. Grace, sweetness, charm, have no affinity for me. Helen," he flashed out, suddenly facing her, "I was a fool ever to think I could make you care for me. I have no doubt it is all for the best. I might have got very tired of you. It would be awkward to marry a woman and then wish you had n't done it. But it is foolish for us not to be friends, especially as I want your valuable services on the hospital board."

After he had gone, Helen caught herself laughing two or three times. "He is certainly unlike any other human being," she reflected, and then she laughed again. She was glad they were to resume their old friendship, and yet she had an unexpected feeling of disappointment. It was sensible in him to accept the inevitable, but it was not flattering.

The winter passed swiftly, and the spring came. Jean had more orders than ever before, and her heart seemed wholly in her work. She was beginning to make a name for herself, and to be invited about in the outside world. Helen was thoroughly glad of Jean's success, but it made her feel lonely. She could not help looking forward to the time when their grandfather would die, and the home be broken up. She knew just the kind of life her sister would choose then, — a nomad one, including many trips to Paris. She herself loved the peace of her own fireside, and all her talents lay in the direction of making a happy home.

Helen threw herself into her hospital work with all her energy, and tried to think that it satisfied her. She had never been unhappy when she was younger, but at present life seemed monotonous, probably because she was approaching middle age. The doctor was on friendly terms with her once more, but she preferred his for-

mer avoidance, for it implied more feeling for her. His hospital seemed a sufficient interest in life for him. That was doubtless because he was older than she and was a man. She began to long to grow old. It would be so comfortable to reach an age when one would demand nothing but a level, placid existence. Then she remembered that when she was a girl she had thought this period would come at thirty-five, and she wondered if the age ever arrived when one would cease to long for the impossible.

By the time spring came, her life had grown intolerable, and she was seized with a desire to have an entire change. At this juncture Elsie wrote to ask if Jean or Helen could not come to Minneapolis, to spend the next two months with her. Jean carelessly turned the letter over to Helen. "I'm too busy to think of going," she said, "and of course you won't want to, either."

"I should like to make them a visit," said Helen.

Jean had a feeling of blank despair. "What should I do without you?" she cried.

"I don't suppose I had really better go," Helen said irresolutely.

Jean had recovered herself. "Indeed you must, if you feel like it. You have had so little change; I am always the one to make visits."

XIII

Helen went to Minneapolis, and to three persons who were left behind the bottom seemed to have dropped out of everything. Mr. Thorndyke tried to think that Jean was sufficient for his happiness, but he missed his other granddaughter at every turn. It was not merely that Helen was always ready to copy his sermons, to remind him of his various engagements, to do his mending and remember his favorite dishes, — it was far more than this. Helen had the good spirits of a happy child, joined to the excellent sense and judgment of a sympathetic woman. The gap she left was one that it was impossible to fill.

Poor Jean struggled bravely to fill it, and it made her unhappy to know that she could never be to her grandfather what Helen was. She succeeded fairly well with the housekeeping, but she hated it more and more every day. Nothing interested her, the weeks had to be lived through somehow, but she counted them off one by one in dull despair. It frightened her to think how dependent upon one person she was for her happiness.

When she and her grandfather sat together in the evening trying to be cheerful, but very silent, one of them was pretty sure to say, "How we miss Helen," and the other, "Two weeks have gone, thank heaven!"

Then Jean would get the book they had all begun together, and read aloud; but the story had fallen off sadly toward the end, and was as disappointing as life.

Afterwards came some games of chess, in which Mr. Thorndyke invariably beat, and Jean said, "If I live a hundred years I can never learn to play chess well;" and her grandfather, too kind to assent, too truthful to protest, observed, "You are improving, dear. Chess is like life; it requires a great deal of patience and philosophy."

And Jean returned, "Grandfather, we may try to gloss it over, but it is no use; we may as well admit that life is simply intolerable without Helen."

As for Dr. Reycroft, he gave no outward sign of missing Helen, and rarely mentioned her name, although he came to Jean's studio frequently to sit for his portrait.

Jean, however, insisted upon keeping her uncle posted as to her sister's movements, and one afternoon she read him extracts concerning Helen from one of Elsie's letters.

"Uncle James," she said, "listen to this."

"'Jean, you have no idea what a good time Helen is having, or how young she seems. Men, women, and children have all fallen in love with her. They are so surprised that she has n't any of the Boston reserve. I tell them they ought to see my other cousin. There are two young men, Ben Foster and Dick Wallace, who are crazy about Helen, and I hope something may come of it. I told Ben that she was thirty-one. I did n't dare to put it any younger, but I was sorry I had n't when he said, "I had no idea she was as old as that." And then what did Helen do, the very next day, when the question of age came up, but spoil it all and put me in a very awkward position, by saying she was thirty-five. Ben did n't seem to mind her being so old, and I think he liked her all the better for her frankness. I mean to go in for literal truth and absolute sincerity; it gives people such a sense of confidence in you. As Alan says, there is nothing like it. I hope Helen will be married, for she would make an ideal wife, but I 'm sorry it will have to be to a Minneapolis man, for we shall not be here next winter. Has Helen told you that Alan has decided to go back to the East this autumn and take up the law again? The law, you know, has always had the same kind of fascination for him that dancing has for

me, only his father was so close about money that he had to go into business when he wanted to marry me. I tell Alan I shall not be satisfied with anything less than having him one of the justices of the Supreme Court. He says he should like that himself. . . . We shall live in Edgecomb, in the Nichols house, as Annie is going to Europe. . . . It was sad that Alan's father died, but he was nearly seventy, and he did have what the English call a "nasty temper" (if I am going to tell the whole truth, I may as well begin at once); and if he had to die, I 'm glad it happened when we are young, for money makes such a difference in this world. Is n't it nice that people can't carry their money with them to heaven?'"

Jean folded up her letter and said, "Would n't it be terrible if Helen should marry? I could n't bear it. I should commit suicide."

"There seem to be two of them," said the doctor gloomily.

"It would n't surprise me if there were sixteen, — she is such a dear; and she has never had a chance to know any men before."

"Has n't she?"

"I mean young men, — men to fall in love with her. Would n't it make you very unhappy to have her married?"

"Not if she married the right man."

"Uncle James, how altruistic of you!"

"Yes, I always was altruistic. I have the reputation of being selfish, but my selfishness, like your beauty, is only skin deep. Is that other letter you have there from Helen? I am altruistic enough to be willing to listen to it, although she has n't written a line to me."

"Have you written to her?"

"No."

"That may have something to do with it. Helen and I write to each other every other day."

"Good Lord, deliver us! I 'm glad I 'm not the lover of either of you."

"Uncle James, it is a pity you never married, for you would have made a charming lover. Were n't you very fascinating when you were young?"

"I always thought so, but no one else seemed to agree with me. Why do you think I would make — would have made a charming lover?"

"Because you have such a delightful sense of humor."

This reminded the doctor of something amusing. He laughed so heartily that Jean was obliged to reprove him.

"You must n't laugh," she told him, "for I am working on your face now."

When Jean's portrait of her uncle was at last

finished, it was admitted on all sides to be the best piece of work that she had yet done. It was not a flattered likeness, but a strong one.

"I suppose it is good," the doctor said gloomily, "but you 've made me look like a rigid old Calvinist with a stern sense of justice."

"A rigid old Calvinist with a sense of humor," Jean amended. "Whenever I am tempted to think you the most disagreeable man in my acquaintance, you say something amusing, and then I know you are the most delightful."

The portrait of the doctor was bought by some public-spirited citizens and presented to the hospital, to be hung in the waiting-room.

"As a scarecrow to keep patients away," he said grimly. "I say, Jean, it is a little hard on me that you should climb the ladder of fame by means of pillorying your aged uncle."

"Never mind, Uncle James; it will make us both famous. We 'll climb the ladder together, and what shall we do when we get to the top? Shall we have to sit there? That will be rather uncomfortable, but I shall be glad to have your company. By the way, Helen was so anxious to see your portrait that George Morley has taken a photograph of it, which I 've sent to her."

"The deuce you have."

"Why not?"

"Oh, it 's all right. It will remind her of home, and offset the attractions of the sixteen young men who are in love with her. She will think, ' I cannot leave such a fascinating uncle, with such a Grecian profile and angelic disposition, for any of these. No, as the girl said in "Punch," young men are all very well to dance with, but you can't have any rational conversation with a man under fifty, and Uncle James always could converse.' That photograph will certainly insure her coming home heart whole."

Helen's home-coming was unexpectedly delayed. Elsie was ill with malaria, and entreated her to stay until June, and help her move to Lake Minnetonka. When they were settled there, Elsie drew such a piteous picture of the lonely days she would be forced to pass while Alan was in Minneapolis, if Helen went home, that her soft-hearted cousin could not bear to desert her. It ended in her staying with the Nicholses until the first of September, when they all came back to Edgecomb together.

Dr. Reycroft stopped for one minute to see Helen the night of her return, on his way to an urgent case. His face beamed with such satisfaction at the sight of her that Jean told him he looked like the Cheshire cat.

"If there is anything more smiling than a Cheshire cat, you look like it, young woman,"

he retorted, "and as for your grandfather, I should say he had grown at least ten years younger."

The doctor did not come to see Helen again until she had been at home several days; then he appeared one evening when they were all sitting on the piazza entertaining half a dozen callers. Unluckily there was no vacant chair near Helen, and Dr. Reycroft had to sit down next to Alan Nichols, whom he cordially disliked, and to whom he invariably contrived to say something sarcastic or disagreeable. Jean saw that he was behaving badly, and made Alan change seats with her.

"Is n't it delightful to have Helen at home again, Uncle James?" she began.

"Well, I don't know. You can hardly expect me to find it as delightful as you do."

"Why are you so disagreeable?" she asked him boldly. "Have you any patients who are dying?"

"No, poor things! They are all unlucky enough to be struggling back into life."

"You are tired," Jean said, with quick compassion.

"I am never tired. I have n't time to be tired."

"You have time to be cross," she suggested. "What is the matter?"

"Do you think those fools are going to stay all the evening?" he demanded.

"If you speak a little louder, I'm pretty sure they will go home."

He eyed Fred Hobbs and his chair in such an unfriendly way that at last the young man rose and took a seat on the piazza railing. Dr. Reycroft with an irresolute motion slipped into the vacant chair.

"Well, Uncle James," Helen said, "I thought you never were coming again. It is delightful to see you."

"It must be thrilling. Nevertheless, you managed to stay away from your eastern friends for five months with perfect ease. By the way, how are the sixteen?"

"The sixteen?"

"Yes, the sixteen wild westerners who were in love with you."

"There were not sixteen of them."

"The six, then."

"There were not even six."

"Well, I know there were at least 'our cat and another.' How are the happy pair?"

"They were flourishing, when I last saw them."

"I suppose they had charming manners, — the real western cordiality?"

"Yes."

"I hate good manners; they are so insincere."

"I like good manners," said Helen tranquilly.

The doctor turned abruptly and asked Susie Hobbs some question about her little girl. He made a short call, and slipped away without saying good-night. Jean followed him and caught up with him just as he reached the sidewalk.

"Uncle James, won't you come to tea tomorrow night?" she asked.

"No, I can't; I'm too busy."

"Don't you think Helen looks younger and prettier than before she went away?" she inquired presently.

"I never thought Helen pretty, and I never supposed any one else did."

"Oh, of course she is plain," Jean readily assented, "but she has a charm that makes her sweeter-looking than many prettier people, — the dear thing."

"You seem to be daft on the subject of your sister."

"Uncle James, what is the matter with you? Do please tell me. I am sure that something is making you feel blue."

"Do you really want to know, Jean?"

"Very much."

"Well, then, I will tell you. I have a stylographic pen."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know? One of my patients can instruct you, for when I told her I had a stylographic pen, as a little bit of news that would be sure to interest her, because it was of such vital importance to me, she said, 'I 'm so sorry! Those pains is bad!' Good-night, Jean. It is unkind of you to laugh in that heartless way, for those pains is bad. That is why I am blue."

Jean was too much occupied to think again of her uncle's depression, for she was hard at work on two portraits that had to be finished before her sitters went back to New York, and her free time was given to Helen and Elsie. Poor Elsie was still far from strong. She had severe attacks of neuralgia in her head, which made her utterly wretched while they lasted. Her cheerful spirits asserted themselves, however, as soon as she felt a little better. Jean marveled to find her so fascinating in her rôle of invalid. She had a way of throwing herself on one's mercy and taking it for granted that one was interested in her symptoms, which was very engaging, and she was prettier than ever. It was some consolation to her that she could wear the daintiest of tea-gowns; and when Jean strolled down in the afternoon, she usually found her on the piazza, in the hammock, propped up

with cushions, with her hair in a heavy gold braid down her back.

"Here I am as usual," she said to Jean one afternoon. "I've got a new tea-gown. I hope you like it."

Jean looked admiringly at the white India silk sprayed over with violets, with the lavender ribbon and white lace down the front. "It is charming," she said. "You do have the prettiest clothes, Elsie."

"I'm sorry it can't be blue, for blue is so much more becoming to me, but you see I'm still in mourning for Alan's father. You don't think it matters, do you, that the violets have green leaves? There is so little of the green, and it isn't as if I had ever been fond of old Mr. Nichols. Why, here comes Mr. Compton!"

Mr. Compton was a young liberal minister whose services appealed to Elsie far more than her grandfather's, although she seldom allowed herself the luxury of going to his church, out of respect to Mr. Thorndyke's feelings.

"He isn't coming in. That is too bad! Don't you like Mr. Compton, Jean? There is something romantic in a man being so devoted to the memory of his wife, and I like his having put up that stone to her, 'Here lies Estelle, beloved wife of Francis Compton.' If one had

to die, a stone like that would be a great consolation. Why, here is Alan. He has got back early. Well, dear, have you had a good day? Come and give me a kiss."

He obeyed her somewhat perfunctorily.

"He does n't like to be demonstrative when you are around, Jean," Elsie observed.

"Here is George Morley," she said a little later. "Now this is pleasant. I am sorry to have to receive you in this invalid fashion, George," and she held out a pretty hand with an amethyst ring upon it. "And will you please excuse my hair?" She gave a little glance over her shoulder at the thick gold braid.

"Will I excuse it? Yes, indeed! Any one can be forgiven for having hair like yours."

"I mean, of course, will you excuse my wearing it down my back? It is so heavy that it makes my head ache if I put it up. Alan tells me if I mind the weight so much, I might have it cut off."

"That is very unkind of Alan," said George.

"Yes, he likes to say provoking things, but he has his good points, just the same. See the beautiful amethyst ring he has given me; it almost makes it worth while to be ill."

George examined the ring gravely. "It 's very pretty," he said, "and it seems to match the hand that goes with it."

Jean had an unreasonable sense of injury in seeing Elsie and George together. She caught herself wondering how it would seem to be the wife of a man who was so easily interested in every pretty woman. She ended by feeling sure that he had never seriously loved herself, and that he had n't it in him to care deeply for any woman.

When Jean took her departure, George rose to go also.

"Elsie is a fascinating little thing," he said as they walked toward the village together. "I hope Alan is sufficiently good to her. A woman like that needs a world of petting."

"She is certainly very devoted to him, and seems perfectly satisfied."

"Yes, and I 've no doubt he cares for her in his own way. It used to seem the strangest match to me, but a woman like that is enough to explain any man's being swept off his feet."

Jean had something of her old sense of rebellion that to certain women is reserved the charm of looks and manner which is sure to captivate men. She felt that these surface attractions should have been given in equal proportions to all women. She was determined, however, to do justice to Elsie. "She is a dear child," she said with enthusiasm.

"She is such a warm little thing," George

continued. "She seems to have room in her heart for the whole world. It must be a pleasant sensation to have a woman so much in love with you that everything you do and say is of great importance to her. I believe I could love any woman who loved me, and live happily with her. I should think it so awfully good of her to care for me."

"I think what you say is true, and I hope when you do marry you will be very happy."

"If one is talking about the happiest kind of happiness" — George began and paused.

"I suppose the happiest kind of happiness comes to very few of us," said Jean. "And after all, part of the delight of life is believing in some beautiful, impossible thing. We say 'If I had this or that I should be happy,' but if we had it we should want something else. All I expect is to have a good solid content. I am thoroughly happy in my work and in my love for Helen. Of course we all have our dreams, but a reality like mine is enough. When one has the reality, with the vague dream of something better, — better work in the future, wider usefulness, deeper friendships, it is enough."

"Perhaps so, if you happen to be an idealist and an artist; but if you are a plain, average business man, you crave something earthly and concrete."

"Which means that he intends to marry, as soon as he can forget me enough to fall in love with some one else," thought Jean. "Well, so be it."

XIV

Winter set in early that year, and snow fell before Thanksgiving. There was an unusual amount of illness, so that Jean often did not see her uncle for days at a time, while Helen, on the contrary, had frequent opportunities for meeting him in connection with her duties on the hospital board. Jean was pleased to find that he and her sister had gone back to their former cordial relations. Sometimes he took Helen with him when he drove to the neighboring towns to see patients, which gave Jean a qualm of jealousy; but she reflected that he knew she was too busy to go on these expeditions.

One cold afternoon when the thermometer was almost at zero, Dr. Reycroft stopped to let them know that he was too busy to come to tea, as he had promised.

"How comfortable you do look here!" he said, as he warmed his hands before the blazing fire. He let his eyes wander about the cheerful room, and finally rest on the bright spot in the centre, where a tall lamp with a huge yellow

shade was throwing its friendly light on a dark head that glanced up from a book, and a red one that was bent over some sewing, for Jean had been reading aloud to her sister.

"Do sit down for a few minutes, Uncle James," she begged.

"I can't. I must be off. I've a case on hand in West Dumfield that may be an all-night affair, and I've got to find somebody first to sit up with old Mrs. Thomas. She's ill with pneumonia, and it was too cold to move her to the hospital."

"I thought one of the hospital nurses was taking care of her," said Helen.

"She is, but she's completely used up for lack of sleep, and so I promised to get some one to relieve her for to-night. I'm going to try for Miss Blake, at the Corners."

"It is a long way to the Corners, and in the opposite direction from West Dumfield. Why don't you try nearer home?"

"Because the old days are over, and women are no longer willing to do charity nursing of that sort without pay. Well, good-by, you useless and ornamental beings. I wish I could stay to tea."

His manner was unusually gentle as he took leave of them, and he looked so tired and worn that Helen's heart was full of compassion.

"Why could n't I take the nurse's place to-night?" she asked. "I am certainly as capable as Miss Blake."

"You, Helen? It is n't fit work for you."

"Why not? It won't hurt me to be useful and a little uncomfortable just for one night."

He paused irresolutely.

"Uncle James, don't let her do it," Jean begged. "Mrs. Thomas's house is so forlorn, and it is such a bitter cold night."

"I should like a little real work, just for a sample," Helen said. "It would do me good to see how other people live."

"Perhaps it might," the doctor admitted. "You 've always been on the fringe of life."

"So have I," said Jean.

"Yes, I have n't the slightest doubt that a little disagreeable experience would do you good, young woman; but I can't risk my patients' lives for the sake of family discipline."

Helen was deaf to all her sister's objections, and finally the doctor promised to come back for her at seven o'clock. Jean and her grandfather hovered around like uneasy spirits, as Helen made her preparations for departure.

"If I had seen James I would have put a stop to this," said Mr. Thorndyke. "It is two degrees below zero — two degrees, do you under-

stand, my dear? If you will insist upon going, you must tie your head up well. I am sure you will take cold and have pneumonia yourself."

The doctor was in a great hurry when he came, but he was so fond of the old minister that he bore more from him in silence than from any other man. At last they were allowed to go out to the sleigh.

"Be sure to eat these crackers in the middle of the night, Helen," said her grandfather, as he hurried out of doors and thrust a paper bag into her hand, "and — wait a minute, James — Helen, dear, that veil over your head is n't warm enough," and he ran into his study with the brisk step of a young man, and came back presently with a large red bandanna handerchief that he put into her lap. "Don't let her use herself up, James. I wish she was n't going; she is n't very strong, dear child. Wait a minute and I will get another shawl."

But the doctor's patience was exhausted. "We are not going to the north pole this trip," he called back, as he started up his horse.

"Grandfather can never quite realize that Jean and I are grown up," Helen said, as she tied the red handkerchief over her ears.

"Why do you put that thing on? You know you don't need it."

"Because it will please grandfather."

"Helen, I 'd give half the remaining years of my life to have a temper like yours. I should have thrown that handkerchief out of the sleigh, or chucked it under the seat."

"You accomplish twenty times as much as I do," she returned. "If one has nothing but the sweetmeats of life, it is very easy to keep one's temper. It must be so satisfactory to be doing something of the greatest use all the time, and to have the gratitude and good will of hundreds of people."

"It is n't. You can undeceive yourself on that point, my dear Helen. The life of a country doctor is hard and grim enough at the best; but when he chances to be born with an irritable temper, he does not even get the perquisites that belong to his profession. Gratitude! Good will! I save my patients' lives and then they say, 'What rude manners Dr. Reycroft has!' That is the reward I get!"

"You might give up your profession if you feel so strongly, and lead the idle life of a country gentleman," she suggested mischievously.

"I should adorn it so well! Some men are born in a treadmill, and they have to keep on, like horses, without a pause. But when you talk of enjoyment, the kind of thing a man like your grandfather feels every time he meets a

human being, you are romancing. No, life is hard, when one has n't a talent for getting on with people, and when one's business consists in dealing with them. I 'd like to live my life over again, the last twenty years of it, I mean, and I would n't miss the only thing I ever really cared for."

His voice softened as he spoke, and a sudden wave of feeling swept over Helen. She could not misunderstand him, and she was penetrated to the heart's core with pity and affection, and the desire to give from the abundance of her love and happiness to this lonely, misunderstood man.

"Well, we are almost there," he said, as she was about to speak, "and I must begin to give you instructions as to the case. You know I 'm very hard on my nurses, and I 'm not going to be partial."

Mrs. Thomas lived in a forlorn little cottage on a side street. Her rooms were neat, but very bare. A crackling fire was roaring in an air-tight stove, and a kerosene lamp with an unevenly trimmed wick filled the air with its perfume and threw a dim light on the wrinkled old woman with unseeing eyes, as she tossed about in the adjoining room on her bed, with its patchwork counterpane. The nurse was pinning on her hat, as they entered, and looking at

her reflection in a distorted mirror. She moved languidly and seemed too tired and listless to know what she was doing.

"The lamp is smoking," said the doctor.

"I will see to that," Helen assured him.

"Why, it is Miss Helen Gordon, bless her!" Mrs. Thomas exclaimed. "To think that a young lady like you should come to take care of a poor old woman like me!"

"Now, Miss Grey, if you will show me where everything is before you go, I shall be very much obliged to you," said Helen. "I do hope you will have a good night's sleep."

"She will," said the doctor very gently, "and she certainly deserves it."

After they had left her, Helen trimmed the wick of the lamp and made her patient comfortable for the night. There was not much to do for her, except to give her medicine and nourishment at stated intervals, and Helen had a long night in which to think. It seemed to her that she had never before had a taste of life in its deeper meaning. It was true that she had always lived on its fringe. Sheltered, happy, loved by all who knew her, accomplishing her easy duties with grace and charm, and her charities with little personal inconvenience, her friends had always given her the kind of adoration that implied it was enough for her to

exist, like a beautiful flower. She looked at the wrinkled old woman, whose sightless eyes made her feel such a rush of compassion that her own eyes filled with tears. Helen loved her at the moment with intensity. She stood to her for a type of the suffering of the world.

Helen had sometimes wondered how doctors and nurses could show such painstaking devotion to their most unpromising patients, and such eagerness to save lives that held in them so little apparent joy. She wondered no longer. It almost seemed as if she herself were the old woman tossing on her bed of pain, so keen was her sympathy; she knew how dear all her humble belongings were to her: the patchwork quilt, that she had made in the days before her eyes failed her; the crayon photographs of her husband and her son, who had died long since; the blue mug on the dresser, from which her boy had sipped his milk when he was a little child. Yes, and she could even understand how life could hold some pleasure still, even with its many deprivations. She had often wondered how Mrs. Thomas could have such cheerful spirits. Now she seemed to know. Hers had been no artificial, sheltered existence; those toil-worn hands had worked for others; she had led the natural life of love, work, happiness, and then alas! of sorrow, but she had lived. There

was always the past to remember, — the dear past, — and there were still light and sunshine for others, and the sounds of birds and gay young voices, — little, broken fragments of happiness such as happier women despise. It was to minister to such as these that Dr. Reycroft had given his life. This one night was only a sample of the crowded, weary hours that succeeded each other rapidly for him, with oh, how little pause for rest or pleasure! And she, who might have been so much to him, had only added to his burden of disappointment and regret. The reasons why at first she had felt sure she could not love him seemed now to be drawing her the more strongly to him, and her heart swelled with gratitude and happiness when she remembered that it was not too late.

The doctor brought Miss Grey back at a preternaturally early hour in the morning, in his anxiety to relieve Helen, and as he glanced around the room, he said, "How cosy you have made things look."

Helen laughed a glad little laugh, for there was no difference in the room, except that she was in it.

"Curious that a blind old woman who has lost her husband and son should want to get well, is n't it?" the doctor asked, as he helped Helen into the sleigh.

Her eyes had a far-seeing look in them as she replied, "I can understand it. I could love life like that."

When they reached the parsonage, she begged him to come in and take his breakfast with her.

"My dear Helen, you must not pamper me in this way. I've had a partial breakfast at the Smiths."

"A glass of milk, I suppose?"

"Worse than that: a cup of vile coffee and a doughnut. How can people live on such stuff?"

"Did you have a satisfactory case?"

"I suppose you'd call it satisfactory, with your flame-colored views. Another little life has come into this disappointing world; another girl has begun to whimper and cry for the moon."

"She won't get it," said Helen; "but when she has quite given up longing for it, she will find that a kerosene lamp is a great deal more satisfactory and useful, take the year through."

She glanced at the clock as they went into the hall. "We shall have the world all to ourselves," she said. "It will be some time before even our cook gets down; we are such a lazy household. I'm too hungry to wait for my breakfast. I'm going to make some coffee myself, and boil some eggs."

The doctor followed her into the kitchen and

helped her with her preparations. He had the handiness of the men of his profession, and did things well, however little grace he might have in the execution. He looked at Helen every now and then with a glance of perfect content. She smiled back at him.

"Is n't this good fun?" she inquired.

They sat down at the bare kitchen table with their coffee and their eggs, and presently Dr. Reycroft exclaimed, "I 'm not so sorry for the working man!"

"Nor I for the working woman."

"I have n't had such good coffee since I was a boy," he said, as he rose at last, "and that, as you are well aware, was a long time ago."

"Was it? I feel as if we were in a fairy-tale to-day, where every one stays young."

"You always will, Helen."

He paused irresolutely, as he was about to leave the room, and then walked on into the entry with his slouching gait. Presently he came back. "Helen, I meant to thank you for sitting up with that forlorn old woman last night, but somehow you looked so fresh and radiant this morning that I forgot you had n't been on a pleasure excursion."

"I had. I really enjoyed it."

"And I am very thankful to you for my breakfast. I 'm not so rude and ungrateful as I seem."

"I never thought you were either."

"Helen Gordon, that is a little too much."

"I mean I always understand how you are feeling inside."

"Do you? Good-by and good luck to you. 'May duty performed be a rainbow to your soul,' as they say in the copy-books. What a lot of fool lies people tell about life!"

Still he did not go, but stood looking at her with that expression of overflowing content.

"Do take care of yourself," she begged. "I shall always picture you now as breakfasting on doughnuts and dining on sausages."

"I can't take care of myself. I never have, and I'm too old now to begin, and the only person I ever wanted to have take care of me refused the job."

"And you told her you were sure it was for the best, for you had no doubt you would have grown very tired of her."

"I liked to hear myself talk. Well, good-by, Helen. If it is any comfort to you to know that you've made a complete fool of an old fellow like me, you can have the proud satisfaction, for I can't get over caring for you, and there's no use pretending I can."

"Why should you get over caring for me?" she asked tremulously.

XV

It was the day before Christmas. Helen and Jean had sent off their last packages and were resting after their labors.

"How I do hate Christmas!" Jean exclaimed. "I always think I won't do anything about it next year, and when next year comes I always do. Society seems to drive you to it."

"I like Christmas better and better every year," said Helen. "And this year — Jean, I want to — to tell you something. I want to show you a present I've had. If you will come into my room, we shall be sure not to be interrupted. It is something your uncle gave me a few days ago."

Jean followed Helen with unsuspicious interest, and watched her open a bureau drawer and take out a ring which she slipped on the third finger of her left hand. As she crossed the room, the diamond caught the light and flashed out brilliantly.

"How beautiful!" said Jean. She had a sense of injury as she remembered that her uncle had never given her anything half so val-

uable. "It looks like an engagement ring," she added lightly.

"It is."

"But, Helen, I thought you said that Uncle James — I thought" —

"Yes, he gave it to me."

"But I thought you said — I can't understand — what do you mean?"

"I am engaged to your uncle James," said Helen quietly.

The sudden shock of the news, and what seemed to Jean the utter inappropriateness of the engagement, made her feel sick and giddy. The room swam before her as she sank into a chair. There was a long pause.

"Jean," Helen entreated at last, "for heaven's sake, do say something. Don't give me that stony look. I had no idea it would be such a surprise to you. Your uncle said he was sure you knew that he cared for me, and I thought in the last fortnight you must have seen that I — why did n't you think of it?"

"I don't know," answered Jean in a dull voice. "I always thought of him as just as much your uncle as mine. We have always shared everything."

"I thought of him in that way at first."

"He is so much older than you are," Jean went on pitilessly.

"Yes, but I am not very young."

Something in the set white face of her sister smote Helen to the heart. "I thought you would be glad," she said, "for you are so fond of us both."

"I hope you will be very happy," Jean returned in a constrained voice, "and I am sure you deserve to be, only — I can't understand it."

"At first I felt just as you do — it seemed to me impossible; but after I had been away from him five months, I found I — cared."

Helen was longing for sympathy, and she wanted to pour the whole story into her sister's ear, but she could not do it now.

Jean sat in silence for a moment longer, then she kissed Helen and left the room. "How can I bear it?" she asked herself.

She felt that she must get into the broad spaces of out of doors. It was a gray day, with the promise of snow in the air, but she put on her bicycle suit and mounted her machine, although the roads were not especially inviting. "I cannot bear it," she said to herself over and over again, "and I cannot understand it."

Jean took a long ride through the brown desolate country, hardly noticing where she went, — on and on, only caring to be in motion, with the vague feeling that she could somehow outride her trouble and leave it on the road. It was not

alone her sister's engagement that disturbed her, but also the appalling discovery of certain fiery traits in her own character which she thought she had outgrown. Jean had known in her childhood that she possessed a jealous temper and a nature that was uncomfortably intense, but thought she had made herself over through self-discipline. Now, however, something had occurred which gave her the feeling that she had had a glimpse into a bottomless pit. Everything she saw there was unworthy, selfish, and base. Jean was always pitilessly truthful with herself, and so did not seek to hide under any veil of comforting phrases the depths she found in her own nature. "The reason I find this so hard to bear is not only because of my love for Helen," she confessed, "but also because of my love for myself. I always want to be first, and now they love each other better than any one in the whole world. Oh, to think that we can go on for years in such blindness, and then that some chance thing should discover us to ourselves." As she looked back over her past, she saw herself in no more favorable light. "I have always been selfish and self-centred," she said, "always, from the time I was a little child. The kind of civilization that being grown up imposes on us has veneered me over with a decent outside, but I am still a savage at heart. And

Helen, all her life, has been unselfish, bless her! Well, she deserves to be happy, but I cannot understand how Uncle James can satisfy her! How reserved we New Englanders are! All Helen said was, 'When I came back after five months, I found I cared.' But it pierced me through and through with certain conviction when she said it. If she had spoken volumes she could not have told me more. I wish I were a man, and that she 'cared' for me. How pale it seems to make everything else!"

Jean rode on and on, with hardly a glance at the surrounding country, until she suddenly found herself on a road that came to a full stop before a brick farmhouse. She knew then that she must have taken the wrong turn at the corner. A woman in a calico gown and some unkempt children were watching her from the window. She remembered that a Mrs. Miles, who was a patient of her uncle's, lived there. The woman came out on the front doorstep.

"Won't yer come in and get warm, Miss Reycroft?" she asked.

"Thank you; I am so cold I will stop for a minute. I was out for a little ride, and took the wrong turning."

She followed Mrs. Miles into the forlorn sitting-room, that seemed alive with cats and children.

"How 's yer uncle?" inquired her hostess.

"He is very well, thank you."

"And how 's yer sister? He 's had her with him the last two times he 's come. I never see her before. She sat right there in that rocker you 're in, and I thought I never see a young lady who seemed to take such an interest. The baby come right to her, and he is usually kind of scared of strangers."

Jean, not to be outdone by Helen, put out her hands to this young person, but he scowled at her and hid his face in his mother's gown.

"Your sister and the doctor was awful kind," Mrs. Miles proceeded. "They brought us a whole box of Christmas presents. The doctor got out and left 'em yesterday, as he was driving by, he and your sister. They said 't wan't to be opened till Christmas, but Lord! you can't keep nothing like that from six children, if they catches sight of it. Tell your sister the little petticoats is just the right size for Maria, by taking of a tuck in them. I dare say you helped to make 'em, Miss Reycroft?"

"No, I have been very hard at work with my painting, and I have n't had time to do much for Christmas."

"Your uncle 's a real good man," Mrs. Miles continued presently. "Jake don't seem to feel as if we could have any one else. When little

Jake was ill, we had Dr. Reycroft, and when he give him up we knew 't was so. 'How many children have you got, Mrs. Miles?' says he, kinder gruff. 'Seven,' says I. 'Well, you 'll only have six now,' says he. Then he got up and looked out of the winder, and I knew he was sorry for us, though he drove off in a great hurry. And now he never comes without trying to make friends with the children, though they are kind of scared of him, same as they is of you. I never saw the doctor in such good spirits as he was the other day; seems as if it wa' n't the same man. What, must you go so soon, Miss Reycroft? I 'm real sorry the baby is so naughty," for Jean had made another attempt to win him over. "You are a bad boy, Joe. She 's the sister of the nice lady with the red hair, the lady who showed you her watch."

"I have a watch too," said Jean. "Let me show you my watch before I go?" she asked in pleading accents of the baby.

He vigorously shook his head and hid his face in his mother's skirts.

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-two months next Friday."

"Oh," she said vaguely.

"Your sister thought he was large of his age."

"I 'm afraid I don't know how large a child

of that age ought to be. I don't know much about babies. Helen can never pass one in the street without wanting to make friends with it."

"They kinder know who is their real friends. Well, Miss Reycroft, I hope you 'll have a Merry Christmas."

"Thank you; I hope you will all have one too. Good-by, you unkind baby. I have n't felt so snubbed for a long time."

"Throw a kiss to the lady," said his mother, but the baby vigorously shook his head.

"Well, I like decision," said Jean. "I would n't throw the kiss if I were you."

Jean felt more lonely than ever as she rode away from the house. She had a vision of Helen sitting in the rocking-chair with the little child in her arms, — the little child who would not come to her. It had given her a peculiar feeling of desolation to be rejected by this stranger baby. Then she seemed to see her uncle, looking happier than ever before, helping Helen into the buggy, and driving away with her into a new world, — a world upon the threshold of which her imagination paused. No, she could not imagine how it would seem to be so much in love that nothing — that no one else mattered. "I can never be happy in the old light-hearted way," she assured herself. "All that is over for me."

Jean was only twenty-seven years old, but life as she looked back to her childhood already seemed very long. It was ages and ages ago when she had lain with wide-open eyes, miserable because Alan liked Elsie best, and longing to be grown up to escape her anguish. She could not have imagined then that there was a far greater trial in store for her than anything connected with Alan Nichols. "Novels make the love between men and women the chief interest in life," she reflected, "and do not prepare us for the awful suffering there is in store for us through the other relations." If it seemed far away to her childish days, almost twenty years, how much longer it would be, in all probability, to the end of her life. In twenty years more she would be not yet fifty, not so old as her uncle; add another twenty years and she would not be seventy, some years younger than her grandfather. "After a while I shall not mind so much," she thought, "but the loneliness will go on and on all my life! I could hardly live through it when Helen was gone last summer, and now she will be gone always, and never mine again, but his."

It was beginning to snow. At first Jean did not notice it, but as the flakes grew thicker she was forced to think of the distance that lay between her and home. She rode on in a kind

of dogged indifference. As she approached the village, the traveling grew more and more impossible, and at last she had to come to a full stop, finding that one of her tires was punctured. She made up her mind to lead her bicycle until she came to the Nicholses', and then throw herself on Alan's mercy, and get him to drive her home.

Alan and Elsie were sitting together in the parlor. He was in his favorite armchair, with a book and a cigar, and she was putting the finishing touches to the costume of a fluffy-haired doll.

"Come, Alan," Elsie said, "you really must look at this sweet thing. Isn't she a beauty?" and she held up for his inspection the tiny figure clothed in cap and cloak of blue.

"Very pretty," he murmured.

"But, Alan, you didn't really look. See, she shuts her eyes, so. And look at her dear little shoes that I made myself. I wish that you ever did take an interest in anything except books."

"While we are wishing, I wish you didn't interrupt me when I am reading books. There is the door-bell. For heaven's sake, Elsie, don't let any one come in here."

Alan was so constituted that he disliked bores, and he included a large proportion of the human

race in this category. It was one of the chief objects of Elsie's life to protect him from annoyance. "Alan is a silent, shy man," she was fond of saying to those persons who did not interest him, the actual fact being that when he had a congenial listener few men could outdo him in talking. Jean found Elsie's efforts to explain her husband and conceal his defects both diverting and pathetic.

When Elsie opened the door and saw her cousin, she gave a little cry of delight.

"Oh, Jean, I'm so glad it's you. Don't go into the parlor, dear; it is cold there. We'll be ever so much more comfortable in the library."

Alan, however, had caught the sound of Jean's voice. "Bring her in here, Elsie," he ordered peremptorily. "It isn't cold; there's a fire."

"You said you didn't want to see anybody," Elsie began.

"I didn't know it was Jean. Of course I want to see her."

He gave her an unusually gracious welcome. There are few women who can be wholly proof against the flattery of such a greeting from an habitually undemonstrative man.

Jean told them of her misadventure, and said she had come to beg that they would send her home.

"Now that is unfortunate," said Alan. "We have let our man go home for Christmas, and there is no one to harness. You 'd better spend the night here."

"I can't. I must be walking on, but I 'll leave my bicycle here if I may."

"Alan, she is n't fit to walk; she 's tired out," expostulated Elsie. "If you will harness, I 'll drive her home."

"The Morleys will send her home, or if they can't they will telephone for a carriage."

"That is a good idea," Elsie admitted. "Will you go over now and ask them, Alan? there 's a dear."

"I have on my slippers. Send one of the maids."

"They are both out for the evening."

"Why do you let them both go out at once?"

"Because it 's Christmas Eve. Never mind, dear, I 'll go," said Elsie, "and take over the doll. Did you ever see such a pretty creature, Jean? I dressed her all myself for the Morleys' Christmas tree. Has Virginia told you about it?"

"No; I have n't seen her lately."

"Well, of course, she and George would n't ask you to do anything for it, because you are so busy. I 'm going over to-night to help Virginia. It will be such fun."

Jean admired the doll as heartily as her cousin could wish. "Give her to me, Elsie. I 'll take her over and see about the carriage myself."

But Elsie danced out of the room before Jean could stop her.

"Alan, she is going across the street in this snowstorm, with nothing on her head. I meant to go myself. She was so quick I did n't realize what she was about."

"Yes, Elsie always is quick," he said imperturbably.

Jean was indignant with him, but her displeasure was checked by recollecting that she herself was at the root of the trouble.

"She has on her slippers," she added, after another glance at Elsie's retreating figure.

Alan came over to the window. "So she has, the crazy child! Well, we can't do anything about it. She is halfway over there now. You may as well sit down quietly and amuse me. I have been thinking of you all the time that I have been reading, and wanting to talk over this essay with you, and then you came in at the door as if in answer to my wish, like a Christmas fairy."

Jean's indignation considerably abated. "What are you reading?" she asked.

"Stevenson. He speaks of our all talking

different dialects, but he puts things in the universal language. Listen to this: —

"'The body is a house of many windows. There we all sit, showing ourselves, and crying to the passers-by to come and love us; . . . but this fellow has filled his windows with opaque glass, elegantly colored; . . . meanwhile the poor proprietor must lie languishing within, uncomforted, unchangeably alone.'

"How true that is!" Alan said. "There is something appalling in the loneliness of life."

"Yes, there is," Jean assented.

"You feel it, too? I thought you disagreed with me."

"There must be times when we all feel it; and Christmas, when every one is merry, and we have done nothing towards the general mirth, and so feel left out, is one of them."

"I hate Christmas!" he exclaimed fervently. "I wish it could be abolished. But I want to read you some other passages: —

"'To reach the truth by yea and nay communications implies a questioner with a share of inspiration.' Isn't that good?"

He read on in his expressive voice, which brought the meaning out of a page more convincingly than any other voice that Jean had ever known, pausing every now and then to make comments.

"There is the door-bell," she said at last.

"Just go to the door, will you, Jean, please? I don't want to get caught."

She found one of the Morleys' maids, who had come to say that they would send her home, and to ask if she would not like to see the Christmas tree, while she was waiting for the horse to be harnessed.

"Let her tell them to come for you here," said Alan, when she repeated the message; "you know you'd much rather hear me read Stevenson."

"I want to see the Christmas tree, and so, although I'm sorry to miss the reading, I shall have to say good-by."

"As you like," he said stiffly.

"I've hurt his feelings," thought Jean, "but I can't help it, for he is really getting insufferable; Elsie has spoiled him."

When Jean reached the Morleys', she had a still stronger feeling of Christmas everywhere, and she alone shut out from it.

"Isn't it a beautiful tree?" Elsie asked. "And think of all the little poor children who have never seen such a sight! Won't it be fun to see their pleasure?"

Jean gazed with admiration at the graceful hemlock, with its branches loaded with glistening balls and dolls and other toys, and its many red,

yellow, and blue candles waiting to be lighted. She wished that she were a little girl coming to this Christmas tree, and then she remembered that on a similar occasion, when she was a child, she had felt far more anguish than pleasure because Elsie had received a bottle of violet perfume, while her portion had been a round comb. No, it was better, after all, to be grown up, for if one did not altogether enjoy the round combs of life, one could at least accept them with philosophy.

"I am very sorry to have kept you waiting so long," said George, coming in presently. "I 've brought your bicycle over here. There is no use in taking it to the shop to be mended until after Christmas. I will see to it for you then, and you shall have it as soon as possible."

"How kind you are!" said Jean gratefully.

She followed him out of doors, expecting to see the coachman waiting for her.

"I 'm going to drive you home," George explained, in answer to her inquiring look.

"But you are so busy. Can't Frank take me?"

"He 's gone home for Christmas, and it is a real pleasure to me to drive you."

"You must have had to harness," said Jean, meditating on the different forms that friendship took with different men.

"That was nothing."

As she drove through the snowstorm by George's side, Jean had the first sensation of warmth and cheer that she had felt since hearing her overwhelming news; and yet, such is the innate ingratitude of the human mind, she was already regretting the unfinished Stevenson essay.

"I could n't have stayed to listen to it," she reflected. "I can't spoil Alan, whatever Elsie may do, but it was a pity, for he does read delightfully."

"George," she said presently, "I have only given to the rich this year, and I should like to do something about your tree. How many children are there?"

"Twenty. Ten boys and ten girls."

"The poor are an unknown quantity to me," she confessed. "I never know what to say to them, and I do so hate to go into their houses. I don't see how Virginia can do so much charity work. Do you like the poor?" she asked bluntly.

"That depends. I know only a few poor people, and some of them I like and some I don't like. You can't ticket off your fellow beings in that way into classes. I 'm not daft on the poor, as Virginia is, if that is what you mean."

"You do have a most human way of looking at everything," said Jean. A few minutes later they stopped at the toy-shop. "Please come in and help me choose twenty ten-cent things," she begged. "My finances are low, you see, although my impulses are generous."

They stood before the shelves of toys, and Jean made various suggestions. "What a fascinating woolly lamb!" she exclaimed, "but I suppose it costs ever and ever so much?"

"Only twenty-five cents," answered the young girl behind the counter.

"That is too much," said Jean, shaking her head. "I should have to get ten of them if I got any."

She felt like a child who had come to spend her small portion of worldly goods in company with her big brother.

"Oh, I know what I will get for the girls, — a bottle of perfumery. There was nothing I liked so much when I was a child, and I suppose little girls are the same now?" She looked inquiringly at the shop-girl as she spoke.

"Yes, miss, they are. My little sisters are all crazy over perfumery."

"It would be more interesting to get different kinds of perfume and have the bottles tied with different colored ribbon, but I am going to get all violet, and have them all tied to the tree

with lavender ribbon. You see, if you are a little girl," she explained to George, "and get rose perfume tied with a pink ribbon, you are sure to want the violet perfume your friend has, and *vice versa;* so my presents are all to be alike."

She selected tin soldiers for the boys, and then handed over her gifts to George. As they left the shop, he called her attention to a group of hungry-eyed children looking in through the window, and fastening their eyes on different objects.

"I can't stand that," he said. "Wait a minute. Step in out of the snow while I see to them."

A little later six articles had disappeared from the shelf, and six small boys were blissfully happy, while George was richer or poorer, according to what value we give sentiment as weighed against money.

Jean was worn out with the various emotions of the day, and as she took her place in the buggy, she was appalled to find the tears coming into her eyes. She seldom cried, and it had not occurred to her that this little scene would bring the tears which had not come in response to a great trial. Suddenly, however, the misery of life overcame her. She thought of the many children who looked wistfully at toys that

could never be theirs, and of the still more unhappy children of a larger growth who would give all they possessed to own what they could never have. "It is the way of the world," she thought, "but the world is not an easy place to live in."

"How do you celebrate Christmas at your house?" George asked at this juncture.

There was a little pause before she could steady her voice, and then she replied, "We always hang up our stockings. It is very childish, but grandfather and Helen prefer it."

She had not disgraced herself, and could talk with perfect composure during the remainder of their brief journey, but how she longed to tell her sympathetic companion of her sorrow at Helen's engagement and be comforted by him! This, however, would have been unfair to her sister, and to accept his sympathy when she had nothing for him in return would not have been right. "No one can help me," she thought; "I have got to bear it alone."

When she reached home she found her uncle and Helen sitting in the parlor. Helen had worried about her when the weather changed, but her uncle seemed to have regarded her fate with entire composure. "I told Helen you would turn up some time," he said.

"That is the part I am to play in his life

hereafter," she reflected. Then she made a great effort; she might be jealous and miserable, but no one should suspect it.

"Uncle James," she said, "Helen has told me something that makes me so very glad for both of you."

"Are n't you glad for yourself, Jean?"

"Yes. I have always wanted a brother, and now I shall have one."

XVI

Helen and Dr. Reycroft were to be married early in March, and the announcement caused an extraordinary excitement in Edgecomb.

"It is just like the doctor to insist on having a thing right straight off," said Mrs. Thorndyke to her daughter and son-in-law.

"It strikes me," said Alan, "that the doctor has been moderately deliberate about this particular thing. Fifty-five, is n't he?"

"Alan, you always are so sharp!" returned his mother-in-law. "I mean that to be married two months after you are engaged is rushing things terribly. If men ever had to get a trousseau themselves, they would be more considerate."

"I can't understand how Helen could ever make up her mind to marry him," said Elsie, "but I suppose she is sorry for him."

"Why?" asked her husband. "Because he is so irritable?"

"My dear Alan," remonstrated Mrs. Thorndyke, "any man is to be pitied, poor soul, whose furniture coverings are worn shiny, and whose

parlor carpet has a threadbare place in the corner. And the doctor is very much in love with her; that may have had something to do with it."

"Well," said Alan, "if a man has known a woman ever since she was a young girl, and has n't had the sense to fall in love with her until she 's over thirty, he does n't deserve to win her. I don't like middle-aged marriages. If a man is going to make a fool of himself, he 'd better do it when he is young."

"Alan, how disagreeable of you! Do you mean that you think you made a fool of yourself when you married me?" inquired Elsie.

"I was generalizing."

"They seem just as happy as if they were young," Elsie ventured.

"That is what I object to," said Alan. "Every age has its proper pleasures. Let girls and boys flirt if they will, and young men and women marry if they must, but let the middle-aged settle down to a career of quiet usefulness. What business have they with falling in love and marrying? It jars on one's sense of fitness and nice propriety."

"And so you would have the poor doctor keep on with his old hospital and sick people, in his dilapidated house, without a bit of comfort, instead of trying to make a nice girl like

Helen care for him, in order that your sense of fitness should not be disturbed?" Elsie retorted. "If it is usefulness you care about, he can be a great deal more useful with her than without her. But I know what the trouble is," she added shrewdly: "you don't like to have Helen marry, because in that way we lose her. Now, I am glad she is happy."

"Any woman is glad when she hears of the engagement of any other woman. It does n't make the least difference who the man is," said Alan.

"Well, I wish that Helen were going to marry some one younger," Elsie admitted.

"I fancy the doctor wishes he were younger," Mrs. Thorndyke remarked. "When George Morley congratulated him, he said, 'Well, my boy, perhaps you 'll have as good luck when you are as old and as ugly as I am.' Poor George, I suppose he 'd give all he is worth if Jean would marry him."

"Jean!" exclaimed Alan. "I hope she has sense enough to stick to her career."

"You really think it would be better for her to keep on with her painting than to marry a charming man like George Morley?" Elsie asked, with wide-open eyes.

"Certainly. A girl with Jean's talent, who is going in for a career, ought n't to be turned aside from it by a fellow like Morley."

"But she need n't give it up," Elsie protested. "A great many women keep on with their careers after they are married."

"Oh, if a woman happens to marry a man who is contented to play second fiddle to a career, it 's all right. But the average man is n't made in that way."

"If you had married a woman with a career, would you have let her go on with it?" Elsie demanded.

"Well," he answered deliberately, "there does n't seem to be much need of deciding what I would have done in that case, as I don't seem to have married that sort of wife."

"I am sure George would be very glad to have Jean go on with her painting," Elsie proceeded. "He is so proud of her talent. He is one of the few really unselfish, sweet-tempered men I know."

"It is easy enough to be unselfish and sweet-tempered if you have everything you want. George was two years behind me at Cambridge; and when I was denying myself even the necessities, in order to get through, because my father did n't believe in my going to Harvard, George was idling away his time, and loafing around with plenty of money to use in being generous to the other fellows. Consequently he was a favorite, and I was not. Is it strange that his temper is better than mine?"

"No, you poor dear; but I think you have a very sweet temper. It is nice it was all made up to you when you married me, is n't it, Alan?"

He did not reply, and Elsie came over to his side to claim a kiss.

"Don't mind me in the least, Alan," observed Mrs. Thorndyke. "I am sentimental myself, and it is a pleasure to me to see you and Elsie as devoted as when you were first engaged."

"Here comes Jean," Elsie said. "We were just talking about you, dear. Alan was saying that he thought you were such a genius that he hoped you would never marry."

"Elsie, I wish you would stop quoting me, or else quote me accurately. You have given Jean the idea that I was discussing her in an unwarrantable way, whereas" —

"Whereas mamma and I drove you into the discussion," Elsie concluded comfortably; "but you did say, dear, that" —

"Never mind what I said; it is n't worth repeating."

Jean had come to borrow her cousin's pattern for a cape, and therefore made only a short call. "I am so busy that I must go directly back," she informed them. "A wedding is most upsetting to a household."

"I 'll walk home with you as far as the post-office," said Alan.

"Your man was getting the letters as I stopped there."

"Well, then I 'll walk along with you for the sake of your society."

Jean's irritation against Alan for his conduct on Christmas Eve had not yet subsided, but it was impossible for her not to enjoy him when he was in his present friendly mood. They talked of indifferent matters at first, but finally he said, "I 'm not going to congratulate you on your sister's engagement, Jean, for I know what an upheaval it must make in your life, and how you cannot be glad in your heart of hearts."

Jean was dismayed to find that he understood her so well, for she had struggled with her first selfishness and jealousy until she had put them far enough in the background to take a genuine interest in all Helen's concerns; and now to have Alan calmly estimate her at her lowest valuation was anything but flattering.

"When a thing is final you 've simply got to accept it and like it, if only for selfish reasons," she said with decision.

"I admire your pluck; but how can you make yourself like a thing simply because you ought?"

"I 've done it a great many times. It is like washing paint-brushes. If I have to do it, I

have to make myself like it, because otherwise I should be so unhappy while I was doing it."

"I can't cheat myself in that way. I know when I dislike things. I should say, 'I hate washing those paint-brushes,' and then grit my teeth and do it."

"I would rather think that it was a little bit of drudgery that I could learn to like as part of a large whole that I loved. And if one can feel so about things, how much more so about people! I love my uncle dearly; but if Helen were going to marry a man I disliked, I should make myself love him for her sake. There are certain people we must love, — fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law."

"In other words, we can go through the world like children, with our eyes shut, or we can face the realities. We may do our duty by our relatives, but love is another matter. Take the case of my father as an example. He very nearly killed my affection for him by his treatment of me. I would not say this to any one but you, but how could I feel the same love toward my father when he did his best to ruin my life?"

"He did not mean to ruin your life," Jean said gently. "It seems to me like this: there are some good qualities in every one, and when

people belong to us, we are bound to look at their finer side."

"That is just where we differ. We do not choose our relatives, and I cannot see our obligation to like them. Our friends we do choose; they may disappoint us or we may tire of them, but as we chose them we must be loyal. I have never given up a friend."

"If I were a man whom you had once liked and did n't approve of any more," said Jean, "I would rather you gave me up entirely than to have you coldly doing your duty by me. Love is what we want from our friends, far more than dollars and cents, or even help when we are in a scrape, although such things are useful. Duty is palatable only when love is mixed up with it."

"Life seems so simple when we are young," mused Alan. "We think then that it is going to be easy to be perfectly truthful. I wonder if you remember any of my old theories? I wish from my heart that I could carry my conclusions to their logical end, but the common morality and conventionality of the world forbid it."

"I must stop at this store and get some ribbon for Helen," said Jean, whose mind had been wandering to her errand.

"Life is easy enough for a woman," Alan returned, with a bitter little laugh, "for if she

is in any moral perplexity, all she has to do is to go down town shopping."

"I did n't mean to be rude, but I must get the ribbon. Will you wait for me? Or shall I say good-by to you here?"

"I will say good-by now. I give way to the superior attractions of my rival."

XVII

Elsie was ill again. Poor Elsie had had so many little illnesses of late, and demanded so much sympathy, that her friends were beginning to tire of her pretty invalid ways. First there was the cold she took by going out in her slippers on Christmas Eve, which was very careless of her, as her husband did not fail to point out; and then there was the attack of grippe she had, after her cousin Helen's wedding, when she would insist upon wearing a low-necked gown, contrary to Dr. Reycroft's orders; and now that the east winds of May had arrived, her neuralgia returned.

Butterflies have a necessary place in the world so long as they flit about and make us glad by their bright happiness; but a butterfly with a broken wing is a different matter. Most of us say, "Poor thing, what a pity!" and pass on to other butterflies who are fulfilling their mission. Jean was one of those women whose affection is always the tenderer for butterflies when their wings are broken. She had never loved Elsie half so dearly as she did now, when

she lay helpless and sad, with her gay spirits drooping.

Alan had no especial partiality for disabled butterflies. Nevertheless, when his wife had first been ill with malaria, in Minneapolis, he was as sorry for her as one could expect a man of his temperament to be, who had never had any personal acquaintance with pain; but as the months passed, and it became evident that whenever Elsie was in the least imprudent she was to have a relapse, and when with each relapse she magnified every symptom and grew more and more exacting in her demands upon him, he felt it his duty to make a stand.

One afternoon when his wife had been having a headache, he came home from town hot and fagged.

"Come and kiss me, dear," she begged plaintively. "I 've been suffering terribly all day."

"I 'm very sorry. I hoped your head was better," he said, as he gave her the required kiss.

"No, it 's much worse. It seems as if needles were sticking into my brain."

"How many needles?"

"A hundred thousand, you provoking boy. It is n't any joke to have such neuralgic headaches."

"I think I understand that it is n't, Elsie."

He sat down by the window and unfolded his newspaper.

"Alan, please don't read. I want you to talk to me."

He controlled himself with an effort, and brought his chair over close to the couch where she was lying. She seized his hand and covered it with kisses.

"Shall I tell you about my day's work?" he asked, softening visibly.

"Yes, do, dear. That will be very pleasant."

"Well, those people I told you of have left their tenement at last, and the case won't have to be carried up to the superior court. I thought they were going to appeal."

"What people?"

"The shiftless man with the sick wife, in whose fate you seemed so much interested."

"Oh, I remember. The poor things! Could n't you have managed to let them stay there?"

"Certainly not. My object was to get them out. The landlord was my client."

"But he must have had a great deal more money than they had. It was a shame to turn them out when she was ill."

"She was n't so ill but she could move fast enough. Most women can brace up if it 's necessary."

"I suppose so. Oh, how my head aches! Alan, will you please hand me that vinaigrette? I don't want to hear about such dreary things. Tell me something interesting that you have been doing."

"I am afraid I have n't been doing anything that you would call interesting."

He gave her the vinaigrette, and then took a seat by the window again.

"Alan, do put down that paper."

"Elsie, as my conversation does not seem to please you, I may as well read the 'Herald.'"

There was silence for a couple of minutes, and then she said: —

"Tell me some more about the shiftless man and his sick wife. Did you have to turn them out of the tenement yourself, dear?"

"No; I don't have to do such dirty work as that, thank Heaven! I 'm not a constable."

"Of course not," she said hastily. "What would have happened if the case had gone to the superior court?" she inquired presently.

"The man's defense would not have amounted to anything. The plaintiff would have got possession of the tenement, and could have recovered, by suing the sureties on the appeal-bond, all rent due and damages and costs."

"Could he really?" she said, throwing great animation into her manner. "I don't see any

sense in going to law at all in a case like that, if you are sure to lose it. Tell me some more about it, dear."

He complied readily enough. Her attention speedily wandered, but she was happy in feeling that he was enjoying himself. She said, "Yes," and "How very interesting!" whenever it seemed to be expected of her, and this encouraged her husband to proceed with the account of another case, a suit brought against the maker of a promissory note. After a long and technical explanation of the points involved, he finally concluded: "And so, of course, you see we could n't hold the rich indorsers, and shall have to try to get something out of the maker, who, I am afraid, is insolvent."

"But when his wife is ill, it does seem too hard," Elsie objected.

"His wife? He has n't any wife. Oh, you mean the woman who was turned out of the tenement-house. I've been talking about another case for the last five minutes. There is no use in my ever trying to talk to you about anything that interests me." He took up the "Herald" again.

"Alan!"

There was no reply.

"Alan!"

Still he did not answer.

"Alan Nichols, will you please listen to me?"

"I have listened to you and listened to you, Elsie, until I am worn out, body and soul, in the process, and you can't listen to me, even for five minutes."

"I can, Alan, dearest. Indeed I can. Please try me again. My head is aching so hard I can't listen to anything."

An incredulous smile flitted across his face, but he said nothing.

"You don't believe me? You think I'm inventing my headache?"

"No, Elsie. I am sure your head aches."

"You think I am making more fuss than is necessary?"

Silence on his part.

"Alan, what do you think?" she persisted.

He went over towards her and spoke in the low, quiet tone he always used when his patience was at an end.

"I think, Elsie, if you wish to know my real opinion, that you always exaggerate every ache and pain, in your desire for sympathy, and make mountains out of molehills. Don't cry. I did n't mean to hurt your feelings."

Elsie had burst into a half-hysterical fit of weeping. He stood helplessly before her, uncertain what to do next. Finally he said, "Elsie, you will make yourself ill if you don't control

yourself. There is some one at the front door," he added presently, in accents of relief. "Oh, it's Jean."

Jean came straight over to her sobbing cousin.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"My poor head. It aches so. It has been aching all day, until it seems as if I should go wild."

Jean was as helpless as Alan in the presence of pain. "If Helen were here she'd know what to do for you, but I can only be very sorry," she said.

Five minutes later Elsie was laughing as merrily as if there were no headaches in the world, which seemed to justify Alan in his theory.

When Jean rose to go he said he would walk home with her.

"I thought you were going to stay with me," Elsie suggested wistfully. "I won't talk any more about my head, if it bores you."

"I'll be back directly."

"Alan," Jean began, as soon as they were out of the house, "I feel worried about Elsie." She proceeded to dwell on some of her cousin's symptoms, and to suggest that she needed a change of climate and of scene.

Alan heard her in silence for some moments, but finally his patience was exhausted. "Jean," he said, "I don't think you quite understand the

situation. Elsie's troubles are largely imaginary. If you lived with her you would see that she complains if she pricks her finger. I am not blaming her," he added hastily. "I have no doubt that her head is troublesome, but I am sure if she were to brace up, she would be all right. Mind cure is what she needs."

"I don't agree with you, Alan; petting and sympathy are what she needs."

"If you pet her and pity her, it keeps her mind on herself and makes her ten times worse."

"Have you ever tried it?"

"Well, not what you would call petting and pitying, perhaps, — they are not much in my line; but you and Helen have, and after you have gone she is always more exacting."

"Poor child," said Jean softly, "perhaps she misses the petting."

"Elsie, like most women, has but one idea at a time," he went on, "and when that idea happens to be her ailments, it makes conversation difficult. When I come in I try to divert her mind, but I 'm not always very successful."

"You talk about law and politics?" she suggested.

"Sometimes."

Jean had been getting more and more exasperated with Alan during the last few weeks;

and much as she disliked to make herself disagreeable, she felt that the time had come for speech.

"Alan," she said, "if you had severe pain, and Elsie never pitied you, but kept up a cheerful talk all the time about her gowns and the servants, do you think it would brace you up?"

He was silent a moment. Then he replied frankly, "I don't suppose it would."

"What you would like would be to have her pity and comfort you and tell you how much she loved you. Poor little Elsie! it is hard enough to be ill, even with all the petting and loving and comforting that one can get."

Alan seemed on the point of speaking, but checked himself and presently changed the subject.

When he bade her good-by, Jean said awkwardly and shyly, "Alan, it was very rude of me to give you advice about what is n't in the least my business, only — we both love Elsie dearly, and want to do the best for her, and I feel strongly that your way, although conscientious, is mistaken. She is such a dear! And it seems pathetic for her to crave outward expression and not get it, when the feeling is there. But perhaps you are right. You know her a great deal better than I do."

Alan gave her a penetrating glance which she could not understand. He looked hard and cold, and she felt that for some reason what she had said had been worse than useless.

"You will forgive me?" she asked. "You are not angry with me?"

"No, I am not angry with you. Only I sometimes wish — it does not seem to occur to you that I have tried — that I, too, am to be pitied, that — that I want to do the best for Elsie," he ended somewhat lamely.

A moment before Jean had seen the matter only from Elsie's side, but now something in the tones of Alan's voice gave her a vivid comprehension of what life must be to him, clouded by the complaints of an invalid wife, from whom at the best of times he had never had any sympathy in his chief interests. He was upright if he was cold and narrow, and he was trying hard to do his duty.

"I know you want to do the best for Elsie," she said warmly. "I never doubted that; it is only a question of ways."

Something of her warmth of manner seemed to reach him and suddenly sweep over him. "And are you sorry for me?" he asked.

He seldom spoke with so much feeling, and his tones thrilled her through and through. There was a pause, during which she was gathering herself together with an effort.

"No," she answered steadily, "I am not sorry for you, because you are strong and a man, and have the whole outside world to live in. I am sorry for Elsie, because she is ill and a woman. Good-night!"

As Jean hurried into the house she acknowledged to herself that she had not told Alan the truth when she said she was not sorry for him. She had never felt so sorry for any one in her whole life. With her power of putting herself in another's place, she could feel keenly the dreary sense of nothing being worth while, that must surely come to a man when he first begins to recognize that his marriage is a disappointment. She could imagine how eagerly he would cling to what was left, — the charm and gayety which had once infatuated him; but when they had departed, it would take a man of strong character or great power of loving to make the best of the inevitable. And yet he had chosen Elsie, and he had promised to love her, not only in joy and in health, but in sickness and sorrow. It was for him to accept bravely the discipline of this marriage, loving his wife the more dearly because she suffered, cherishing her the more tenderly on account of her very faults. Was Alan strong enough to do this? He was not loving enough, for his was a nature that valued a thing in proportion to the difficulty of its

attainment. When Elsie had been a fascinating girl, bestowing her smiles impartially on an admiring world, she had appealed far more to his heart and imagination than she did now, when she loved him with a passionate affection that would have moved a warmer nature to the quick. Was he strong enough to do it? she asked herself again; and she answered, Yes. She felt that in time he would adjust himself to the changed conditions of his marriage, and she believed that the pity which all strong men must feel for the frail and weak would be the very influence that was needed to soften his character. He was so fine in many ways, so honest and truthful, and he had such a high if narrow sense of duty, that she could not find it in her heart to predict for him failure and disillusion. No, everything would surely come out right in the end, but alas! she could not help them. Her intervention would only serve to widen the breach between them, and pity was the very last thing that she must give him.

It was a comfort to remember that she had an evening at Helen's in store for her, and she changed her gown with nervous haste and went down to her sister's.

Dr. Reycroft lived in a square, old-fashioned white house, a little nearer the village than her grandfather's, and on the same side of the street.

When Jean entered the parlor, she found Helen sitting before the blazing wood fire, mending one of her husband's coats. She rose with a glad exclamation, putting her arms around her sister and kissing her warmly. They had been somewhat sparing of caresses in the old days, but this demonstrativeness on Helen's side was a part of the new order of things. "She is so happy that she is running over with benevolence and good will toward the whole world," Jean thought.

"Oh, Helen, dear, it is such a comfort to see you," she said. "I've been with Elsie, poor child! Whenever I come to your house, I feel smoothed out morally and mentally, and exhilarated as if I were in the mountains. You've changed this room very little, and yet you've given it what it needed, just by being in it. It used to lack atmosphere, and seem dreary. Now it's the pleasantest room I know."

"Jean, what a flatterer you are! You and your uncle will completely spoil me."

"So Uncle James is a flatterer too? I never should have suspected it."

Jean had once thought that her affection was sufficient for her sister's happiness; now she wondered at her egotism. Here was Helen, not yet three months married, and a different person already, with broader sympathies and a

wider outlook. She had taken up her husband's interests as if they had been her own, and the hospital and his sick patients were almost as much a part of her life as they were of his. The bare facts were prosaic enough, — a middle-aged man married to a woman no longer very young; and Jean marveled that romance should have deserted the handsome young couple at the other end of the street, and taken up her abode in this shabby setting.

"Did you hear a carriage?" Helen asked. "I am expecting your uncle every minute."

Jean had now become so accustomed to her sister's divided attention at this hour of the day that the jealous pang these words gave her was not severe.

"You were talking about the pastel of Polly Hobbs," said Helen. "How are you getting on with it?"

"Pretty well, considering she is such a little witch, I've" —

"Here he comes. Excuse me a minute, dear," and Helen went to open the front door.

Her uncle was almost as ardent in his greeting of Jean as Helen had been.

"It is so good to see you," he said warmly.

"Uncle James, I hear you have become a flatterer, so now I shall never know when to believe you. All the same, I like compliments,

whether they are sincere or not, especially to-day, for I was very low in my mind when I came here, so please go on."

"That is a charming gown of yours," he observed. "It's new, isn't it?"

"It is only three years old," she said with resignation. "I'm glad you like it, though, for it gives me confidence in it. You *are* looking at things through rose-colored spectacles, when you admire this old gown! Uncle James, have you begun to get tired of Helen yet? Because whenever you do, I shall be glad to take her back."

"She is annoying at times, but I've decided that the friction of life with her is good for my character."

"What does she do that is annoying?"

"She is so infernally good natured that I have never had the satisfaction of losing my temper once since we were married, and she is death on dust. Now I've always maintained that top shelves were a very suitable resting-place for it. And she is extravagant. She makes me have a fire every cool day; and she insists upon my stopping to eat my meals when I'm in a frantic hurry to get off."

"Please give her back to me, then. I'm perfectly willing to have her do all my dusting, and I like a fire, and our meals have fallen off dreadfully since she left."

"I can't in conscience do it, Jean. She's spoiled you long enough. I would n't have risked your character another six months under her influence."

"Uncle James, you and Helen look too provokingly happy! Do you think I ought to say 'Aunt Helen,' by the way? I suppose it would be more respectful. Or shall I call you plain 'James'?"

"Don't call me plain James, I beg of you. It was bad enough to have you paint me as plain James."

"You are growing so handsome I shall have to paint another portrait of" —

"Good heavens, no! Helen, is n't it fortunate that we are going to Europe this summer? If she does me at all, she 'll have to do a memory sketch."

"You are going to Europe!" Jean cried.

"Yes, we are going for two months," assented Helen. "I did n't think it was fair to tell you until your uncle came in. I 've been trying for some weeks to make him take a vacation, and I 'm so pleased."

"How delightful for both of you!" said Jean heartily. And she thought, "How can I live for two months without them!"

XVIII

Jean stood before her half-packed trunk, trying to make a broad-brimmed shade hat and a dainty best one, trimmed with lace and pink roses, go successfully into the same bonnet-box. She might have the joy crushed out of her because her sister had gone to Europe, but this was no reason why her best hat should share the same fate. The hat and its wearer were going to the seashore to spend a fortnight with Susie Hobbs. Jean had come to that point where she felt she must have a change; and as her grandfather was to be in the mountains with friends for a part of his vacation, she could leave home with an easy mind. She had determined not to give a thought to any of her problems while she was gone. As long as she stayed in Edgecomb she could not get away from the sense of responsibility about Alan and Elsie, and now that she no longer had the antidote of Helen's cheerful presence it was doubly hard.

Elsie was losing strength, and growing more exacting and complaining. Jean thought it possible that her advice to Alan had borne fruit,

for he was less impatient with his wife, and spent more of his leisure time with her. Mrs. Thorndyke did not fail to spread a report of his devotion through the town.

"It is really wonderful to see the way in which a grave, busy man like my son-in-law gives himself over to waiting on his delicate wife," she remarked. "He always was wrapped up in her, but now she has n't a wish, a whim, that he does not gratify."

Susie Hobbs's invitation had come at precisely the right juncture. There are times in one's life when the most stimulating intimate friendship is not so welcome as a steady surface regard joined to cheerfulness. Jean hoped to be beguiled into believing, while she was with Susie, that the world was a delightful spot, full of simple pleasures and homely duties.

It was hard to bid good-by to Elsie, for Jean knew that her visits were the chief diversion in the poor child's life. Elsie took her hand and pressed it to her lips, kissing it over and over again. The tears came into her eyes, and she finally murmured in a broken voice, "You dear thing, I don't know how I can get along without you."

"It is only for two weeks," Jean said, much moved in her turn. "I shall come back with so many things to tell you, and in better spirits."

"But you seem in such good spirits always, — so serene, as if you'd got to a place where nothing made much difference. I suppose it's because you are so strong. I was always cheerful once. Alan used to say I was like a humming-bird. He doesn't say that now, poor Alan! He will miss you, too. Don't go home just yet. Alan will be so disappointed not to see you."

"I can't wait to see him. I'm in a great hurry. I will leave a good-by for him with you. When I come back I shall be able to tell you all about Susie's house and Polly. She's fascinating."

"Yes. Fred Hobbs seems perfectly wrapped up in her. It's queer to see such a silent, awkward man so crazy over a child. You must be sure to tell me what he says and does."

"He is only going to be down there on Sundays, so I shall have Susie all to myself, and it will be just like old times."

"Jean, you have a way of talking of men you don't like as if they were the dirt beneath your feet. Fred Hobbs is very nice, if you only treat him well. Here comes Alan now! How good of him to bring me such beautiful roses! Jean has been talking about husbands as if they were poor sticks at the best, just a necessary adjunct to wives; I tell her they are delightful. Jean, don't go, yet."

"I will walk home with you, if you must go," said Alan.

"Thank you, but I 'm on my bicycle. Good-by."

He followed her out into the hall. "You 'll write to us?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Elsie and I are not going to write letters. We are only going to write postal-cards. There will be so much more to tell when I get back."

"Won't you shake hands with me?" he begged, "and allow me to say I 'm very sorry you are going, and that I shall miss you, even if you are so ungrateful as to think my sex of no account?"

"That was only Elsie's fun. She seems more like herself to-day. I do hope you 'll decide to try the mountains for her."

"I would if you 'd go with her, instead of making Susie Hobbs a visit, but I 'm too busy to get away at present, and she says she won't go without me. I really don't know how we shall get along without you, — Elsie and I."

"That is the way I felt when Helen and Uncle James went to Europe."

"It is always the person to whom we are not necessary who is necessary to us," he stated oracularly.

"What a gloomy doctrine," she called back

from the doorstep, "and oh, how I hope it is n't true!"

"You may depend upon it, it is true," Alan said, as he followed her down the bricked walk. "Just so long as you devote yourself to a particular person, just so long that person will hold you cheap. Give him a little wholesome neglect, and you 'll soon have him at your feet."

"That may be true of some natures," said Jean, as she mounted her bicycle, "but really warm-hearted people are touched by devotion."

It was one of the hottest days of the season when Jean left Edgecomb, but she forgot all mental and physical discomfort when she felt the first invigorating breath of salt air. She was met at the station by Susie, who looked refreshingly cool and dainty. Her matronly figure and poise of manner made her seem older than her twenty-seven years, but there was a perfection of finish about her that was most attractive. In addition she had that comfortable look of prosperity and unaffected pleasure in the good things of life, that, perhaps unjustly, one never associates with the very thin.

"Well, this is delightful!" she said heartily.

They climbed into the depot wagon, and Jean was soon absorbed in the view. Overhead was a pale blue sky flecked with clouds, while in

front of them the yellow road stretched away to meet the horizon, and on either side was the beach-grass, now green, now silver, now green again, as it swayed in the wind like the waves of an inland sea. Suddenly a white-winged boat glided into view and began to sail across the green fields. Jean gave a little exclamation of delight.

"The bay is over there," Susie explained, "but you can't see it until you get higher up. I always think of the three children sailing on dry land just here."

Another and still another white sail came into sight, until a whole fleet of fishing-schooners had glided noiselessly across the green expanse. They seemed like a phantom squadron bound for some harbor in dreamland. Afterwards Jean sketched this inland sea, on a gray day when sky and land alike were wrapped in mist, and one white sail in the distance was journeying toward the unknown haven, like a human life, shrouded in mystery, bound no one knew whither, but gliding on and on into the unknown, silently and surely. She called the sketch "A Gray Morning," and wondered if any human being would see in it what she had seen. She hoped not, for she was half ashamed of the fancy, as bordering on the sentimental.

The Hobbses' cottage was built on the very

edge of the water, and commanded a view off the harbor, while boats and a yellow strip of bathing-beach were within two minutes' walk of the house. On this beach Jean would sit for hours, with Susie and the little Polly, who ran about barefoot, with her small skirts tucked up and her yellow hair flying in the breeze, while bathing, rowing, and sketching filled in the remainder of the time. In this way Jean passed three happy, tranquil days. At the end of that period she wrote her first postal-card to her cousin, compressing into a few prosaic sentences all her delight in her visit.

Dear E., — I arrived safely after a hot journey. Here it 's refreshingly cool, the thermometer never going above eighty degrees. We are out of doors every moment, and are very happy. There is an unlet furnished house just around the corner, that S. and I wish you and A. would take for August. It seems impossible that it is only the first week in July. I already feel as if I had been away from home a month.

Your J.

The day after she had dispatched her postal-card, as they were returning from a row, the maid greeted Jean with a telegram. She turned pale and her hand trembled as she took it. Her

first thought was that something had happened to Helen or her uncle; her next was of her grandfather. It occurred to her last that Elsie might be worse. She tore open the envelope, and read: —

Take the house. E. and I will come down Friday. ALAN NICHOLS.

"I am sure that will be very pleasant," Susie said politely, when Jean showed her the telegram.

"Yes," responded Jean. Each suspected that the other was not telling the truth.

"I am a little sorry they are coming just now," Susie ventured, "for Fred has asked the Morleys to come down with him on Saturday for a few days, and George and Alan never get on. It can't be helped, however, and now we shall have to go right over and put that house in order and get in all their household supplies."

"Poor Susie! I ought to do it all, for it is I who am responsible. It never occurred to me they would come before next month. Alan said he could n't possibly get away."

"Alan can always manage to do what he wants to do," said Susie.

The Nicholses arrived, to find their house in perfect order, even to the kitchen closet, which

was well stocked, while a fire of driftwood was burning in their parlor, and a most appetizing tea was spread in the dining-room. Elsie's pleasure was as outspoken as a child's.

"How fascinating it is here!" she exclaimed. "And what dears you are to have got everything ready! I wanted Alan to come down yesterday with Hannah, to oversee things, but he would n't hear of it. He was sure you and Jean would direct her, but we never dreamed of this. It is like a fairy-story, and you have even put wild roses in the vases. They are my favorite flower. I feel years younger and miles better already. What pretty cushions! I love that blue-and-white Japanese stuff. Did they go with the house?"

"No, Jean and I covered some of my old ones. We thought you could n't have too many cushions."

"I can't imagine Jean sewing on anything. That was a proof of affection, darling! I am never going to be tired any more. Won't it be delightful to spend whole long days together?"

"Yes, indeed. You must come over to-morrow morning and sit on our piazza," Susie said hospitably.

When the Morleys and Fred Hobbs arrived upon the scene, Jean was sorry to find that sails were to take the place of rows, for she was the

worst possible sailor, and knew that she should be miserable as soon as she was outside the quiet harbor.

The first time that they proposed a long sail she begged to be allowed to stay at home and finish a sketch, but her friends were inexorable. Alan insisted that if she only tried mind-cure she would not have a headache, while Susie assured her that it would spoil the pleasure of the party if she did not go, and so Jean went.

But alas! no amount of will had the least effect upon her, for no sooner were they in rough water than she grew whiter and whiter, at first making praiseworthy efforts to talk, but finally abandoning them altogether; willing to go to the bottom of the ocean, but determining, if she were to escape this speedy end to her sufferings, that no specious arguments should ever beguile her into taking a sail again.

Alan sat near her. He talked to her of Intuitive and Utilitarian morals. Finally Elsie came over and laid her cool hand on her head.

"You poor dear," she said, "I wonder if you would n't rather be quiet? I 'm afraid you are tiring her, Alan. It always tires me to be talked to when I have a headache."

"You and Jean are two very different persons," he replied.

Virginia Morley, who was on the other side

of her, thought she ought to be amused, so when Alan paused she told one of her most diverting stories. Susie begged her to eat, as she was sure that was what she needed, while George left his post to arrange her cushions for her, and suggested that Virginia should hold her sunshade so as to screen her from the light.

"We shall land in half an hour," he said in his friendly voice. It had never sounded so comforting, and Jean could have blessed him on the spot.

Alan proceeded with his information concerning the two kinds of morals. Jean felt as if either sort, intuitive or utilitarian, ought to teach a man that a woman does not want to be talked to when she is seasick. His quiet voice, that went on and on as relentlessly as fate, rasped her nerves, and she wondered how Elsie could bear to have him with her when she was ill. But as soon as she was on land she found him a far more interesting companion than George Morley, who had little to say; in fact, he never talked when Alan was at hand. Alan keenly appreciated everything in the landscape that appealed to her. The gray dilapidated warehouses and the decaying wharves, telling of better days, had the same pathetic beauty for them both, and attracted them far more than

the newer part of the city, which the others preferred. She felt that curious mental nearness to him which sensitive natures often feel, sometimes even when with a stranger, and which for such a nature makes half the charm of life and half its pain. Such persons often have an inner vision of character, knowing almost instinctively what others take years to discover, but this keenness of sight unfortunately does not confine itself to the virtues.

"It is good to live on a day like this," said Alan, as they came back together toward the harbor, after having explored the town.

"It is n't good to live when you are on the water," Jean assured him prosaically.

"Come, it is too bad of you to take that tone when I am optimistic for once. I was going to say that the red geraniums against that old gray house, and the strip of blue sea beyond, with that one white sail, and the stiff salt breeze, but most of all the society of the friends one likes, combine to make one glad one is alive. So far as nature goes, the world is a satisfactory place. It is a pity we human beings contrive to spoil it for ourselves and each other."

"Yes, it is. But there are people who give one the same refreshment that nature does."

"There are," he said significantly.

"I was thinking of my sister Helen; but Elsie, in her way, when she is in good spirits, gives me something the same feeling. She is a child of nature."

Alan did not respond at once, but after a moment's silence he said, "We are talking of different things. I was thinking of the kind of person who gives one a moral brace, and makes one long to be better."

There was another silence, and then Jean said, "Elsie seems like a different creature down here. It is such a pleasure to have her her old self."

"Yes, it was just the change she needed. You always know what is best for every one, Jean."

"Let us catch up with the others," she suggested, quickening her pace, as Susie, George, and Virginia came out of a dark little shop with their arms loaded down with bright-colored pottery.

The return sail was very like its predecessor. Once more the quieter virtues triumphed. George Morley, with his practical tact and his instinctive sympathy, was canonized, while Alan again became unendurable.

"I can't believe that you have never been seasick," Jean said to George, as he helped her out of the boat.

"I never have; but I have cruised around ever since I was a little shaver, and so I am used to people who are."

He had to stop to help Fred Hobbs with the boat, and so Alan was again Jean's companion on their short walk to the cottage.

Susie was greatly tried, for matters were not arranging themselves at all as she could wish. Like many another happy married woman, she was anxious to see her friends as satisfactorily placed in life as herself, and she had asked the Morleys to spend a week with her on purpose that George might have the chance to devote himself to Jean.

Susie determined that fate must be aided, since, left to herself, she evidently was not inclined to do the smallest thing for George. She therefore proposed to her husband, the next morning at the breakfast-table, that he should take the Nicholses and the Morleys on a four hours' sail.

"I suppose you will not care to go, Jean?" she observed.

"No, I thank you. But don't stay at home with me, Susie, for I want to make a sketch."

"My dear, I could n't think of leaving you alone. I shall be very glad to stay, unless Alan or George would like to explore the old town with you."

As Alan was not present, she could safely risk this remark.

"That is just what I should like," said George. "Perhaps you 'll let me carry your sketching-traps, and while you are busy I 'll go off and take a look at the town."

Jean was grateful to her heart's core. This was the most satisfactory form of devotion that she could imagine. Her conscience, however, would not allow her to accept it without a protest.

"You ought to go on the sail," she said. "It is very stupid to hunt around for a good subject, unless you are going to sketch."

"I think I 'll stay."

Susie was in despair. She could foresee precisely how their morning would be spent, and she determined that she would never, so long as she lived, try again to make a match for a woman who was an artist.

Just as George and Jean were about to start on their expedition, it chanced that Polly came down with her nurse, all equipped for an excursion to the beach. The little girl had taken a fancy to "Aunt Jean," as she called her, and had contrived to worm herself into her affections, while George was a still dearer being in her eyes. She took hold of his hand in a confiding way and remarked, "Want to go to walk with

Aunt Jean and George. I 'se be very good; I love 'ou."

George was very fond of children, but it had not been part of his plan to devote himself to this small child to-day.

"Polly is going to have a nice time with Maggie on the beach," he said.

She shook her head. "Want to go to walk with Aunt Jean and George," she reiterated.

"Not to-day, Polly," Jean said firmly. "Aunt Jean is going to be busy with her sketch."

"George can play with Polly," the small mite announced, with an irresistible glance from her blue eyes.

George, who found it difficult to refuse even the youngest of the feminine sex her heart's desire, said, "Oh, well, let her come along, Maggie. I 'll look after her."

And so they proceeded down the quiet street, George carrying Jean's easel, sketching-umbrella, and paint-box, Jean taking Polly's small hand in hers. It was only for a moment, however, for the little girl immediately left Jean and tried to get possession of George's hand that held the paint-box. "You take box," she suggested to Jean, "and George take Polly."

Jean laughed. "You may as well hand over the paint-box, George," she said.

It was absurd that she should feel a pang

because George had supplanted her in Polly's affections, but it was the truth. She did not wonder at the preference, however, for George was growing to seem more lovable to her every day. She liked his manliness and his love for out-of-door sports; she liked his friendly manner towards young and old, rich and poor alike, and his straightforward simplicity joined to unselfishness and humility. These qualities went far toward making up for his practical turn of mind, which did not interest her.

"Now, Polly," he said, as they approached the harbor, "we must find the most dilapidated old hole we can, for that 's the sort of place your Aunt Jean likes best."

"It is too bad to make you go on such an expedition."

"Not at all. Polly and I know that it is our fault that we don't like things that are tumbling to pieces, but we have got to be honest or die."

Jean at last found a situation that entirely satisfied her. George placed her easel at one side of the road, near a wharf with slimy green piles, and a group of fish-houses behind it.

"Now we 'll go off," he said, "and wish you the best of luck."

Jean could not put her mind on her work while the two figures were in sight. She watched George stooping to look at Polly, and listening

to her childish prattle with as earnest attention as he would have given to the greatest lady in the land. The little person in her pink sunbonnet and pink-and-white gingham gown made such a ravishing picture against the gray background of fish-houses that a sudden thought struck her.

"George," she called out, "I believe I 'll paint you and Polly, if you don't mind."

"All right. We were going to buy some bananas, but it is n't of any consequence. Is it better for us to sit in the broiling sun? Or shall we look just as picturesque if we are in the shade? I don't mind a little thing like a sunstroke in the cause of art, but I feel responsible to Susie for Polly."

"Of course you may sit in the shade, you poor dears. It is very selfish of me, I know, to paint you at all, but one seldom gets such a subject."

Jean soon found that to sketch Polly, with George to amuse her, was a very different matter from sketching her by herself. The little witch nestled up against him, and was willing to sit still for some minutes at a time. At last, however, she began to be hungry.

At this point a blue cart, full of yellow bananas, opportunely came down the main thoroughfare which crossed their street a little distance away. George started in pursuit of it. No

sooner had her protector gone than the child began a tour of investigation.

"Polly," Jean called, "come back here this minute!"

The little rogue shook her head and began to run down the wharf.

"Polly, stop!" Jean commanded. "You will tumble into the water!"

Polly only laughed merrily and quickened her pace.

Finding that commands had no effect, Jean started to catch her. This made the child all the more excited. She felt that she was having a race with Aunt Jean. She shook her yellow locks and ran on gleefully. Jean saw with horror that there were only a few feet between her and the end of the pier. She ran after her breathlessly. In another moment she expected to reach her and pull her back by the skirts. She was almost near enough to touch her, when the child's foot slipped, and she fell headlong from the end of the wharf, far, far down into the deep water below. Jean paused. The blood in her veins seemed changed to ice. She had a minute of terrible indecision. She was not a good swimmer, and had never jumped into the water from a height. She had an uncontrollable physical dread of taking the plunge. For a moment she was stricken dumb and motionless. Then,

with a great effort of will, she looked over the edge again, but grew giddy and faint. Hastily turning, she ran toward the shore and tried to call George, but her voice had not yet returned. It was noon, and all the men about the wharves and fish-houses had gone home to dinner. Jean had an instant of agonizing suspense, as she watched George coming towards her with what seemed to her excited mind snail-like deliberation, as he waved the yellow bananas gayly. She felt as if she were in a nightmare, for she could not utter a sound, but she made frantic signs to him to hurry. He ran towards her and she gasped "Polly." Then he understood. Jean pointed to the end of the wharf, and covered her face with her hands.

"Don't worry," he said. "It 's all right."

In another minute he had plunged into the water and was swimming to shore with the small damsel.

Jean had sunk down on the wharf, breathless and trembling. When she saw that they were both safe on shore, she tried to get up to go to their assistance, but could not move.

Polly's eyes were closed, and George was bending over her, trying to restore her to consciousness. The awful possibility that the shock had been too great for her gave an added horror to all that Jean had undergone. For an instant

the whole smiling, happy world seemed veiled in black.

"Don't worry, she 'll be all right in a minute," said George in his comforting voice.

Jean marveled at his coolness and self-possession. "The next time you wish to take a bath, young woman, don't dive from a wharf," he said, as Polly opened her eyes, "for I may not always be around to fish you out."

The sketch could not be finished on that day, and they started in a sorry procession to return to the house, George carrying the dripping Polly.

Suddenly Jean gave the child an ardent hug.

"Oh, you dear thing!" she cried. "And you really think she won't be any the worse for it, George?"

"She 'll be all right to-morrow."

"If it had n't been for you she would have — drowned," Jean said, with a shudder. "I should never have had the courage to jump in after her."

"If you had gone in after her, I should have had to fish you both out, and Polly might have drowned while I was saving you."

"But I can swim enough to get to shore from the pier. I am sure I could have saved her, and yet if I had been alone with her, I know that I should have let her drown before my eyes."

"You don't know anything of the kind. If I had n't been there you would have found some other way of saving her."

She shook her head, unconvinced. "Such things are a terrible test of character," she observed. "I have always wanted to know what I should do if a child fell into the water, and now I know. To think of the great wrongs that can be done in one little moment; and that one can be a fairly creditable member of society for more than twenty-five years and then slip up like this through selfishness and cowardice! I should have suffered all my life long just for one moment's wrong-doing. It 's too horrible to think of," she added with a shudder. "And you were so brave and cool."

"Nonsense! It did n't take any courage. I 'm a good swimmer and used to jumping off high places; that 's no merit of mine."

"I can't even console myself by thinking it is because you are a man, for Virginia would have jumped in after Polly just as you did."

"She 's a good swimmer."

George was a hero with the women of the two households for the rest of the day, for Jean took care that his courage should not be hid under a bushel. The men were not so impressed by his bravery. Alan philosophized on the situation to Jean.

"It is as natural for a man to jump into the water and save life as it is for a dog to plunge in after a stick. Don't praise a man for simply following his instincts. You need n't be ashamed that you were afraid. Fear is always the sign of a more complex and delicate nature. It means that you have imagination and a highly nervous organization. There is no credit in mere physical courage. The courage comes when you feel fear and conquer it."

"Well, at any rate, I fancy Susie finds the instinct of the average man more satisfactory than that of the highly susceptible, nervously organized woman," Jean retorted.

XIX

GEORGE had no opportunity to see Jean alone on that day or the following morning. Late the next afternoon, as she was sitting on the piazza with Susie and the Nicholses, he boldly asked her if she would like to take a row with him.

"Very much," she replied.

"I was just on the point of asking Susie and Jean if they would n't go for a row with Elsie and me," Alan stated. "Suppose we all join forces and have a sail in the harbor? We 'll promise not to take you outside."

"That would be very pleasant," said Jean.

"I would rather take Jean by herself," said George, with his imperturbable directness, which for some reason never gave offense.

Alan smiled. "Which would you prefer, Jean?" he asked her.

"I don't care in the least which I do."

"Now you have made a mess of it," said Elsie, laughing. "In trying to be polite you 've hurt our feelings all around. George naturally is n't

pleased, and neither are we. Polite fibbing is n't your forte, dear."

"I 'm glad it is n't," said Alan.

"Will you come for a row with me? Or shall we all go for a sail in the harbor?" George inquired.

"I will go for a row with you, as you asked me first."

"I know it is selfish of me to take you away from the others," George said, as they went down to the little pier, "but it is for the last time; I am going home to-morrow."

"To-morrow! I thought you were to stay over Sunday!"

"Virginia will stay, but I 've been telegraphed for; I 'm needed at the factory."

"I 'm very sorry!" Jean exclaimed heartily.

They said nothing more until she was seated in the stern of the boat, and he was facing her, rowing with steady, even strokes.

"How beautifully you feather your oars!" she observed. "I have never learned to do it; in fact, my accomplishments all seem better suited to dry land," she added, with a little laugh.

"I 'm going abroad the end of next week," George announced abruptly.

Jean felt as if her last prop were leaving her.

"For how long?" she inquired.

"For three months."

"Well, I 'm very glad for you. I suppose you 'll enjoy it immensely."

"I hope so, although I 'm not going for enjoyment, primarily, but for business."

Jean trailed her hand along in the water. "I shall miss you," she said.

"Shall you? I fancy you 'll be able to get along pretty comfortably without me."

Something in his tone hurt her. She looked at him keenly with her expressive eyes. "I am in earnest. It is n't polite fibbing; I shall really miss you."

"I mean to be so busy that I shan't have any time to miss you."

"I have no doubt you will be too busy to miss me; that is the difference between a man's life and a woman's."

"Did you think I really meant it?" he asked impetuously, as he stopped rowing and leaned forward. "You could n't have thought it! There is n't an hour in the day when I don't think of you. You come in between me and everything."

"I 'm sorry I 'm such an interfering person," she said, trying to speak lightly.

"I should like to forget you," he owned. "It has been intolerable, down here, to see you so friendly to everybody, and to have you so cruelly kind to me, and yet so cold."

"I 'm not really cold. It 's only my unfortunate manner."

"If you are not cold, you 'd have some little feeling for me. I know I don't deserve you, but I love you so that I 'd give my life to make you happy. And an old warehouse and some tumbling-to-pieces old wharves call out a great deal more feeling in you than I can. I 'm neither artistic, nor picturesque, nor forlorn, in my outward appearance, and so nothing in you responds to me."

"We care for such different things."

"Yes, that 's why I love you. You have always stood for poetry and romance to me. You seem to turn everything to gold that you touch. I can't put it in words you 'll like, because I don't know how to talk, only — having you in a room where I can see you, even if you don't say a word, makes the whole day happy, and to have you with me always would be like heaven."

The tears came into Jean's eyes. "Oh," she said, "how I wish I could care for you as much as you care for me, but I can't."

"No, and you can't help it, any more than I can help loving you. I did n't mean to say this when I brought you out here away from the others; I only meant to say good-by; but now I 'm going to tell you everything this once. I 'd like you to know how much you 've been to me.

It began ages ago when you were a girl of fourteen."

"It could n't have begun then; perhaps you think it did now, but it could n't have, for I was so shy."

"That was one reason I liked you; you were so different from other girls. I felt sorry for you at first, because you were such a poor dancer; and then one afternoon when Alan and I came to the house, you talked about George Washington. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"You seemed so frightened."

"I was frightened nearly out of my wits."

"But you were very interesting. I had never heard you say so much before, and you had such beautiful eyes — they fairly shone. You wore a dark red gown, I remember. After that I used to dance with you more."

"Yes, you were always very good to me."

"Even then I began to think in a shy sort of way that when we grew up I should marry you. You stood to me for everything that is best, — refinement, sweetness, high ideals, and simple every-day goodness."

"I had n't the least idea that you felt like that about me. I thought you liked Elsie and the other girls a great deal better."

"I don't mean I have n't been in love with

other women. I've had periods of being desperately interested in somebody else, but it was always a feverish kind of caring that didn't last, and I would come back to my feeling for you, and the thought of your truth and goodness was more to me than you can ever know. Before you went to Europe, I was sure I could make you love me some time, for no other man seemed to care for you or think you beautiful; but when you came back, I felt that it was all over. You had been growing mentally, while I had stood still. And yet it wasn't so much that you had changed; it was more that because you were prettier and more self-possessed; others had begun to see what you were. Well, I can't help loving you, even although you are so far out of my reach that I know it isn't any good."

Jean was so moved that she understood why women sometimes engaged themselves to men they did not wholly love through very pity. She had an impulse to say, "I am not what you think; but if you want me so much, take me, such as I am. No one else cares for me, no one ever will care like that."

But she regarded the impulse as unworthy of her highest self, for she knew that the response which awoke half shyly to meet his ardent love was only a faint foreshadowing of what she could

feel. She had a sudden vision of how she might care for a man who united her lover's graces of disposition to Alan's gifts of mind. And yet even this slight rehearsal of a stronger love filled her with unexpected emotion.

"It is n't that I am indifferent and cold," she said, "or because I am so wrapped up in my work that what you have told me does not touch me. It is that I do not care for you as — as you deserve. I could love, I know I could love with my whole heart, and as I know it I could never be satisfied with anything else. I don't suppose I shall ever find the man I could love, and so, as the years go on, life may be lonely for me, but it can never be as sad or as hard as it is for some women, for I have my work. That used to seem the greatest thing in life to me; now love seems greater. If I could ever love as you love me, I should think it the best thing that earth could give; but for you I have only friendship, a warm regard, affection, but not love."

She had spoken in little, abrupt sentences, with a nervousness that made her seem very like the shy girl of fourteen who had first won his love.

After this they were both silent as they glided toward the shore. The sunset colors were glowing in the sky and the quiet water as they landed. Little boats with their white sails moved slowly

across the bay's glassy expanse, and everything spoke of peace.

"How beautiful it is!" she said.

"Yes, but sometimes I hate nature," he returned.

George went to town early the next morning, and Jean found the situation far worse than she had expected. She had known that she should feel keen pity for him, and that she could not wholly escape the reproaches of her conscience, but she had not expected to miss him so acutely. All that day, whenever she thought of him, the tears would come into her eyes. She was so fond of him and was always so happy when she was with him that it seemed absolutely intolerable that she must make up her mind for his sake to lose him out of her life. Sometimes during that long day she had moments of feeling that it would be less impossible to marry him than to give him up, but the next moment she remembered there would always be one side of her which he could never touch, and she said to herself there could be no compromises for her; she must give everything or nothing. She had gained a new insight into life. If she suffered so much simply because she had said good-by to a friend, what must women endure who were forced to part from the men they loved? And when death came to make a lifelong separation

between husband and wife, how could such anguish be borne? Her own life had never seemed so peaceful, so sheltered, and yet so futile. She was half inclined to pray that she might be allowed to slip through the remainder of it without tasting the deepest emotions, half inclined to wish that she might taste them, since she knew now that she had it in her to live and love and suffer.

She had skillfully avoided a tête-à-tête with Virginia thus far, but the evening of the second day after George's departure, when she had gone upstairs for the night, she heard an impatient tap on her door. She knew what was coming.

"Well, here I am," said Virginia. "I'm going home early to-morrow morning, you know, and I've come to bid you good-by."

"Come in," Jean said, trying to speak hospitably.

"I know you don't want to see me, but I'm coming in just the same. I am going to make myself quite at home, so you may as well sit down and take it easy," Virginia added, as she slipped into a chair by the window. She had on a crushed-strawberry India-silk wrapper sprayed over with brilliant purple and yellow flowers, and trimmed with a lavish amount of écru lace; and although the combination of colors jarred on Jean, she could not but admit

that it suited Virginia, and made her look tropically handsome.

"So you 've sent my brother away," she began abruptly.

"I did n't send him away."

"It is the same thing. You know perfectly well he would never have gone abroad if you had cared for him. Well, I suppose he 'll marry some one else. He 's not an idealist like you, and if he can't get the best, he 'll take what he can get. I know I shall hate his wife! I could have loved you, if you 'd only been good to him, but now I fairly hate you."

"I don't wonder."

"Oh," said Virginia, suddenly getting up and beginning to pace the room, "I can't understand women like you. There you have been going about for the last two days as cool as a cucumber, while I have almost died because I 've missed George so. You are made of snow and ice. You can't even imagine what it is to have red blood in your veins. Is n't the lifelong devotion of a manly young fellow anything to you? Just because he does n't happen to be artistic, or care for the same books that you do? I 've no patience with you! You won't find many men who 'd be so willing to let you go on being happy in your own confounded, cold-blooded, artistic way, after you were married.

I remember once asking George if he was n't jealous of your painting, and he said he used to be, but that when he found how much you cared for it he was eager to have you succeed, and I can tell you he has been the means of getting a great many orders for you."

"I know it. He has been very good to me."

"I shall see George to-morrow," Virginia continued. "Shall I take him any message from you?"

"Tell him I hope he will have a pleasant voyage and a satisfactory journey."

"And is that all?"

"Yes."

"I should like to kill you." Then, to Jean's intense surprise, Virginia flung her arms about her and gave her a hearty kiss, after which she hastily left the room.

When Virginia had departed Jean took up "Amiel's Journal" which she had been reading, and felt strengthened by the following passage: —

"I have not given my heart, hence this restlessness of spirit. I will not let it be taken captive by that which cannot fill and satisfy it, hence this instinct of pitiless detachment from all that charms me without permanently binding me."

XX

THERE are few temptations more difficult for a conscientious woman to resist than that of giving a moral brace to her friends. Jean could not help seeing that Alan and Elsie, as well as George Morley, looked to her for strength. She could only bow her head in humility, and wonder what quality of mind or what trick of voice or manner was responsible for their mistaken estimate of her character. She could not but feel that she had a marked influence over Alan, and that when he was with her he saw life with a kinder and therefore a truer vision. She could not but know that Elsie clung to her with pathetic eagerness. When her visit at Susie's was over, and the Nicholses begged her to come to them, she found it difficult to refuse. But there was an instinct too deeply implanted in her to be argued away, even when her conscience took part against it, which forbade her intermeddling with their lives. It was hard to be misunderstood, and to have them think her refusal came from indifference, but she breathed freer

when she had left them, and was back again in the lifeless air of an Edgecomb July. How dull it was at home! It was too hot for work, and even too hot for sociability. There was an endless amount of time, and nothing to do in it except to miss her friends. Even her grandfather, whose comfort she had made the ostensible reason for her return, said he thought it a pity she had not stayed away a fortnight longer. In spite of all her efforts, she could not help constantly turning to the thought of George Morley. She began to wonder if an overmastering passion could ever be known by a woman of her temperament. She more than suspected that her extreme reserve and caution, that made her instinctively draw back whenever she was at the threshold of a new experience, joined to her analytical turn of mind, would prevent her ever becoming absorbed in a great love. Endowed as she was with more than an average share of imagination, fancy was continually picturing to her a life which made reality seem commonplace. What she craved was a marriage as perfect as that of the Brownings or Hawthornes; and then she would suddenly remember that, like Amiel, while waiting for the ideal she might lose the real. And after all what was the ideal? Were the Brownings and Hawthornes exempt from petty trials? Did

not love transform the lives of the most humble? And whenever a man and woman truly loved each other, was not a miracle wrought afresh? It was this power of clothing common things with romance which made life absorbing, and the reason that poets found it more so than others was because they had this power in larger measure. She stood for a poet to her lover, and she sometimes fancied she could make him happy if she would let herself try. But as soon as she had reached this conclusion she had a feeling of limitation, and knew that the chief joy in her life was her unfettered imagination. She could not give up those dreams which sometimes came to her, of a possible future glorified by an ideal love, for something limited and imperfect.

Meanwhile George Morley had slipped as entirely out of her life as if he had ceased to exist. His sister punished her by never mentioning his name, and she was too proud to take the initiative and inquire for him. There came a time, however, when Virginia began to throw out dark hints concerning a delightful family of girls with whom George had become intimate in traveling. Jean was careful to conceal the fact that this announcement gave her pain. After all, why should she expect George to be constant to her when she had not given him the

smallest encouragement? Constancy, she told herself, did not now hold the conspicuous place among the virtues which it had once occupied, for the modern world has recognized that to be constant without hope is the height of folly.

Helen and the doctor came home in September, and Jean's monotonous life once more became interesting. Alan and Elsie returned about the same time, and George Morley came back a few weeks later. Despite all Jean's resolutions, she was forced to occupy herself with the Nicholses' affairs, for poor Elsie had taken another severe cold, and was more depressed than she had ever seen her. Alan did not appear to feel concerned about her. He was absorbed in law and politics, and was often away for two or three days at a time. On these occasions Elsie begged Helen or Jean to come and stay with her, and as Helen would not leave her husband, Jean could not well refuse. At last there came a time when the possibility that her cousin might not get well entered Jean's mind. One afternoon, as she was going up the steps of the Nicholses' house, she met Dr. Reycroft just coming out, and noticed that he looked grave.

"How is Elsie?" she asked. "I hope she is n't any worse?"

He did not answer at once, and then he

replied that she was doing as well as could be expected. Something in his tones sent a chill to her heart. "You don't think, Uncle James, you don't think it is anything serious, do you?" she asked.

"I don't think anything, Jean. My mind is always a blank so far as my patients are concerned. There is no reason for being alarmed now," he added quickly, as he noticed the change on his niece's face, "but I do think she ought to get away from this miserable climate."

Jean found her cousin flushed and feverish.

"My dear," Elsie said, "your uncle has been interviewing me with his horrid old stethoscope. Won't it be wretched if I have to go south for the winter? I could n't bear to be separated from Alan, and he is too busy to go with me. It is very pleasant to be alive, and I dare say it will be very pleasant to be dead, but it is this death in life that I can't stand — this not being able to do anything, or to care for things the way I did once. Jean, don't ever get the grippe. If you do, you 'll be sorry to the end of your days!"

After leaving Elsie, Jean took a long walk into the country, and her heart was heavy with a new dread. Her cousin's whole life came before her in a swift succession of sunny pic-

tures. She saw her as a merry child, when Alan and George were in hot pursuit of her at the Morleys' party, and again as a gay young girl, the belle of the dancing-school, and then she saw her as she was in the early days of her engagement, when she had looked at Alan with her heart in her eyes. Many other pictures came crowding upon each other, — Elsie in her wedding gown with that radiant expression on her face, Elsie at church with that new touch of gravity, Elsie at home, Elsie as she had looked last summer; she covered her face with her hands as if to shut out these recollections of a bygone time. It could not be that she who was so fitted for happiness in this world was to leave it! One could not associate death with Elsie. She would put this terrible premonition aside, and enjoy the autumn beauty that was clothing the hills and meadows. But try as she would to control her thoughts, the chill at her heart would not be dispelled.

As she stooped to pick some blue gentians she heard the sound of approaching voices, and looking up she saw two bicyclists coming into view. One of them was George Morley, and with him was a yellow-haired girl. She recognized her as a member of that family who had helped to enliven George's trip abroad. Jean had only seen him twice since his return, and

in the most formal way. Now she bowed with unusual cordiality, because she did not want to seem disturbed by the presence of this attractive stranger. George sprang off his bicycle as soon as he caught sight of her.

"You are a long way from home," said he. "I wish I could stop and walk back with you."

Jean's eyes followed the young girl.

"How pretty she is!" she said, with the heartiness of a grandmother or a maiden aunt.

"She is a very nice girl," he assented somewhat absently, and Jean had a thrill of gratification when she realized that a smile from her had the power to make him completely forget his charming companion.

A moment before she had been weighed down by the sadness of life, but now she had a swift revulsion of feeling and a sudden impression of joy. He seemed the impersonation of youth and sunshine.

The golden-haired stranger was looking back in surprise, and George remounted his bicycle and soon caught up with her. A peal of girlish laughter was wafted back to Jean, and as she continued her solitary walk she felt old.

XXI

At last there came a time when the presentiment that Jean had thrust aside as too terrible settled upon her more and more securely, until it bid fair to shut out all her sunshine and turn her world to twilight gray. A nightmare vision at first, it became at length a daily guest. She could not, however, make Helen or Alan share her fears. Helen was sure a winter at the South would completely restore Elsie's health, and Alan still refused to take her illness seriously. He assured Jean that it was half a nervous malady, and said she had worried herself into a morbid state of mind, and that it was kinder not to be too sympathetic. Jean could not but see that Elsie's fretful depression and ever-increasing exactions were too great a strain upon Alan's patience, and that he was more ready than ever to seek distraction in outside work. This knowledge made her miserable, for she was sure his old love for his wife was not dead, but sleeping, and that if her worst fears were realized his grief would be accentuated by his remorse. Elsie was not ill enough to need

a nurse, but her mother spent every morning with her and tired the poor child out with her lamentations, while either Helen or Jean was with her in the afternoon. Twice she was so ill when her husband was away from home that Mrs. Thorndyke sent for him post haste, and each time, as soon as he came back, Elsie revived with such speed that her mother declared his presence was all that her dear child needed.

Finally the shadow grew until it enveloped Elsie herself, and she began to discuss her possible death with the same frankness with which she had discussed every subject in life.

"I 've really got to go South for the winter," she announced to Jean one day. "There is something wrong with both my heart and lungs. I listened at the door when Alan was asking your uncle questions. It was very wicked of me, and I was properly punished, for listeners never hear any good of themselves. I made Alan tell me the whole truth afterwards. He made light of it all. He says people often live to a good old age with queerer things the matter with their lungs and heart than I 've got. He 's determined I 'm to live to be sixty at least, poor Alan, but heaven preserve me! I 'd rather die in the flower of my youth than live to be a wheezing old woman, lungless and heartless."

"Don't talk like that, Elsie; you 'll be a great deal better as soon as you get away from this wretched climate."

"I wonder what the climate of heaven is like," Elsie mused. "I 'm afraid it is a little cold. Oh, dear! I do hope they don't have any east winds there! Don't you suppose if I hate it very much they will let me come back and be born over again as another person, or at least an animal? I love this old earth so much that I should like to be here, even if I were only a tortoise-shell cat."

"Elsie!"

"Yes, I would. I always loved the idea of the transmigration of souls. It seems so pleasant to think of everybody having a try at everything. I should like to be a beautiful wood-thrush flying up and up, almost to heaven, and singing its little heart out, and a great white horse, the splendid, spirited kind the cavalry ride, and a faithful St. Bernard dog, and almost everything but an angel; still, perhaps that won't be so bad. It will be nice to have wings. If I ever have the chance to be another person, I shall be so serious and fond of study. I shall be a woman doctor, and spend my whole life with the unfortunate. Fix my pillows, please, darling. No, put the other one on top. Helen always does it just right. I am sure I should

make a fine hospital nurse, for I know how everything ought to be done."

A few days later Jean found her cousin so much worse that she was frightened, and sent for the doctor.

"I am really very much worried about Elsie," she said, as she met him in the hall.

His presence had a quieting effect upon the patient, but it did not wholly stem the tide of her lamentations.

"If only Alan were at home I should feel a great deal better," she said plaintively. "But he is very busy. It 's something important about the election. He made a glorious speech last night. It 's here in the paper. Just read it, Dr. Reycroft. I 'm so proud of him. Is n't it splendid to be a man and to be able to serve your country? I don't suppose Alan could come if I sent for him. The last time I sent he did n't come. He said I was likely to have a great many little attacks like this, but that they were not serious."

"He shall come, if I have to go after him on my hands and knees," said Jean impulsively.

"Don't speak like that, dear. You don't understand men. When they are not needed for the public service, they are devoted to their wives; but of what account is a poor little thing like me when compared to the country?

And yet it seems as if I should die if he did n't come home, and whatever happens to the country it won't die without him."

"Won't you send for him, Uncle James?" Jean entreated.

"I can't conscientiously say that Elsie needs him now any more than she has a great many other times. What he says is true. She will probably have a good many little attacks of this kind, but I won't forbid your writing to him, Jean."

And so Jean wrote a heart-felt appeal, urging him to return. Two days passed, however, without any sign from him; then he wrote that his duties were so pressing that he could not leave at present, but that he would get away as soon as he could. He charged Jean to telegraph to him if there were any urgent need of his return. Her heart was full of anger against him, although she was fair enough to see that Elsie must have been most trying with her importunities. Elsie gave a wistful little sigh every morning when a letter came from Alan giving an account of his work in a few hurried sentences.

"It is grand to have a husband who can make such splendid speeches," she once said to Jean, "but somehow it is not satisfying. He is coming home at the end of the week, though."

Before that period, however, Dr. Reycroft himself became alarmed about Elsie and telegraphed to her husband, for she had had a more serious attack than usual. Elsie was counting the hours before he could get back, and when the time came when he might have reached home, she gave a heart-broken little sigh.

"He is n't coming, Jean," she said, with a break in her voice. "Perhaps I shall never see him again."

"Nonsense, Elsie. You are better now, dear. Uncle James telegraphed to Alan because we promised we would if you were worse. He will probably come in the next train, or to-morrow, any way."

"Jean, I have never felt as I do now. I am sure I am not going to live, and there are ever and ever so many things I want to say to Alan. Oh, dear! I don't want to die! It seems so terrifying to go all by myself on such a long journey. I 've never traveled alone."

Jean pressed her cousin's hand.

"Would you be afraid to die? Does the unknown frighten you?" Elsie asked in awe-struck tones.

"A little. I should not want to die," Jean confessed. "And yet in my heart of hearts I am sure that everything will be right, however it is, and whenever death comes. Life has been

so good and so beautiful, even with all its pain, that it has given me faith in what comes next."

"It has been good," said Elsie, "but I wonder that you should find it so, for you have never had half a chance. You have never known the fun as a girl of having every one swept off their feet by you. Oh, it 's such a joy to be the favorite at dancing-school, and the most popular girl at a party! There is nothing like it, except having the man you care for most in love with you, and belonging to you forever and ever. That is the best of all. But it is very good to be loved by a woman, dear. Oh, I love you so much — a great deal more than when we were girls!"

Again Jean silently pressed her cousin's hand.

"Tell me that you love me, just this once," Elsie begged. "I am not like Alan. He thinks a feeling is stronger if it is n't put into words, but I am so foolish that I just long sometimes to be told over and over again that people love me."

"Elsie, I love you dearly — ten times more than when we were girls. It is n't easy for me to say what I feel, but I care for you so much that — that if anything happened — if you were not here, life could never be the same to me. I think it is the strong love we feel that makes us sure this world, with all its sorrow and misery,

and even with all its sin, is a glorious place, when looked at with a vision larger than ours. That is why I care for life, even without having had what you call half a chance. I care for its beauty and for its chances to work, but most of all for its chances to love. There are days when it seems as if one could take the whole wide world into one's heart."

"Do you feel that, too? That is how I have felt. Sometimes I love even the little gamins in the streets."

They were silent for some moments after this, and then Elsie said, "Jean, there is one thing you must promise me. If I do die when Alan is away, please don't let him put my age and my full name in the paper. He is so truthful he would be sure to do it. 'Eliza, wife of Alan Nichols, twenty-seven years, so many months and so many days,' — he 'd have it all in, even to the hours and minutes, he 's so exact. Fancy! 'Eliza Nichols, twenty-seven years old!' Is n't that ghastly? No, I 'm going to be Elsie to the end of the chapter, an ageless Elsie, eternally young."

Jean could not help laughing, although the tears were in her eyes.

"I am sure I have been a disappointment to Alan in some ways," Elsie went on. "He does care so about the exact truth, and I 've got such a hazy memory for dates and facts that I never

can be accurate, to save my soul. And somehow he seems to give you the feeling that it is just as bad to get a fact wrong, through a mistake, as to tell a willful lie that will injure your neighbor. I suppose it 's because he is so absolutely truthful himself in both large and small ways. But I know he is very fond of me just the same, and will miss me — oh, yes, I am sure of that. If he 'd had any idea how ill I was, he would have come tearing home, would n't he, dear ? "

" Yes, I 'm sure he would."

" There is another thing you must promise me," Elsie continued. " You must make Alan put ' Elsie, beloved wife of Alan Nichols,' on my tombstone, just as Mr. Compton did when his wife died. ' Beloved wife,' — that has a most satisfying sound. You won't forget to tell him, will you, dear ? "

" No, I won't forget."

" And if he does n't come, if I never see him again, you will tell him how I loved him, and how lonely it will be to go away from him, and — who is that at the front door ? It is Alan, Alan himself ! Oh, how I misjudged him ! Of course he would come. I might have known it, only he stopped somewhere on the way from the station. Go to him at once, dear, and tell him to come up."

Jean hastened downstairs and met Alan in

the hall. He looked pale and worn, and her heart was full of sympathy.

"Elsie is better," she hastened to say, "and longing for you. She thinks she is going to die, and she is afraid, poor child. Go up and comfort her."

He looked at her in silence for a moment, and then he said, as if the words had been wrung from him, "How can I comfort her, when I have no faith myself?"

She stood looking at him with her pitiful, grieved eyes. She was shocked into silence for a moment, but presently she forgot herself, and time seemed swept away. She did not think of the visible presence of the man before her; she was a human soul belonging to eternity, trying to comfort another human soul. In this great crisis she felt only the sorrow and the need of these two who ought to be so near to each other, and who through some chance had drifted so far away. So sure was she of the love that lay behind all later dissatisfaction that she spoke to it as if it had been a visible thing.

"If you have no faith in the future," she said, "you can comfort her by your love. I once heard my grandfather say that when people are dying, it is not so much the certainty of the future that they want as the clasp of a warm human hand, the knowledge of a warm

human love. Go up to Elsie now ; she is waiting for you."

He seemed about to answer her, but changed his mind ; then, as she was passing out of the door, he called to her : —

"Jean, are n't you coming back ? "

"To-morrow. Elsie will not need me to-night."

Then he went on into his wife's room.

XXII

When George Morley came home the next evening, Virginia said, "I suppose you have heard that Elsie Nichols died this morning?"

"Yes."

"Poor little soul," she proceeded, "it is very sad; one of those hopeless tragedies. Still, it is n't quite so sad as if she had lived. Every one is pitying her husband, and they all think him a saint, but I am sure if he had been more human she 'd be alive now. Of course I don't say this to any one but you."

"Well, poor fellow, whatever mistakes he may have made, he is suffering enough now," said George.

"Is he? Perhaps. I can never quite believe in the sufferings of such cold people; but however he may be feeling, he is sure to console himself in time."

"Virginia!"

"Forgive me; I know that sounds brutal just at this moment, but I can't help my thoughts. To be sure, I need not have spoken. But no one could help seeing this summer that he was

ten times as much interested in — some one else as he was in his wife. I dare say it did n't occur to him. He 's altogether too irreproachable to admit a thing like that, but he 'll wake up to it after a while, whenever the proper time comes."

George quietly left the room.

His sister felt condemned. She was miserable throughout their dinner of many courses, although she tried to be as lively as usual, out of regard to the waitress ; she was unhappy all the evening, while George sat reading the newspaper, with an expression that warned her it was best not to speak. Finally she could bear it no longer. When she bade him good-night she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

" I 'm a vulgar, tactless, heartless, unrefined, altogether objectionable being," she said vehemently. " But oh, how I do love you, George! Won't you forgive me ? "

" I forgive you."

" Don't look at me so coldly. I 'm consumed with remorse for what I 've said ; and of course I may not be right. It will kill me if I am. It is bad enough to see a woman like Elsie sacrificed to such a man, but if it were " —

" Stop, Virginia. Don't say anything more on the subject, I entreat you."

"I won't, except this one thing. All girls are fools, absolute idiots, wherever men are concerned. You can never count on the wisest of them. *She* can only love when she is sorry for the person, and she 's always got to be sorry for some one. First it was Elsie, and now it will be Elsie's unfortunate husband; you see if it is n't. Can't you lose all your money, George, or your legs, or your eyes? Then you might have a chance."

George went upstairs sick at heart. It was not so much what his sister had said that troubled him, for the same thought had flashed into his mind, as the fact that she could say it at such a time. This lack of delicacy seemed to put a wide world between her and the woman he loved. When he thought of Jean's tear-stained face, as he had seen it that afternoon, it seemed sacrilege to discuss her future. He felt very lonely, more lonely than he had ever felt before. There was no one who understood him.

Now that Elsie was dead, even the strictest New England consciences found themselves saying how loving she was, and what winning ways she had, and, although she was not truthful in little things, how true she was at heart. Every one felt sorry for her heart-broken mother, and for her poor old grandfather, and her cousin

Jean, but most of all for her husband, who must be suffering all the more keenly because of his reserved nature. That old proverb which has been worn threadbare in many a New England household, "Still waters run deep," came into their minds. Sorry as Edgecomb felt for Mrs. Thorndyke, it did not approve of her hysterical lack of self-control, feeling that it showed a superficial nature. Even Jean took her sorrow too much to heart. To be so overcome by death, which is in the divine order of Providence, as to lose one's interest in life and one's power of working, savored of rebellion to the divine will. Alan's course, on the other hand, was heroic. He asked for no pity, and he went on doing his duty as stoically and faithfully as if no heart-breaking event had intervened. Alan had never been loved by the community, but he had always been respected, and now he was pitied and admired.

It was a surprise to Jean herself to find that she was so moved by her cousin's death. She had never fully known how dearly she loved her until she was in danger of losing her, and this knowledge revealed depths in her own nature of which she had not been aware. She had suffered so much in girlhood from her intense temperament that she had schooled herself to take things quietly, until she sometimes

fancied she had lost her power of feeling deeply, and had grown cold. Helen's engagement had been the first event which had rudely undeceived her, and now Elsie's death had awakened in her new powers of suffering. She did not grieve for her own sorrow alone, but for the suffering in the world. Multiplying what she felt fourfold, she had a dim vision of griefs beyond her own, losses that it would be simply impossible to bear. She was consumed with pity for Mrs. Thorndyke, and for Alan, who must now be suffering, as she was, from a late knowledge of having undervalued what he had lost; only added to his grief must be the sting of remorse.

George Morley was her greatest comfort at this time. He used to come and take her into the depths of the country, where the great stretches of brown fields and the blue sky, with the bare trees outlined against it, gave her something of their own peace. He said very little, but she felt his sympathy wrapping her about as with a garment.

"I know everybody thinks me weak-minded not to brace up more," she said to George one day. "But I 've simply got to take this in my own way. As I have a heart, there is no use trying to go on as if I had n't. I should break down later, when everybody had forgotten I

had had a strain. I suppose I mind it more because I was with her so constantly at the last, and hers seemed such a broken, unsatisfactory life."

"I know just how you feel," said George, "and I don't think there is any good in fighting against it."

"She seemed so made for happiness, poor child, and I for disappointment. And then the scales turned, and she was ill and unhappy, and I prospered. I have never been able to get used to my worldly success. I did not expect it. I thought I should always work without recognition. Life is such a strange thing, so full of surprises. And now I have no interest in my work. I know that, too, will pass. Helen thinks I would be happier if I began to paint again. No one who has not done my kind of work can realize how one's powers are dulled, and that it is worse than useless to fight against it. Of course I can't stop teaching, but I know I am giving my pupils dry husks. It would be different if I were Helen. She is so good that she can throw herself into the lives of others, but I am too selfish. I can do it by and by, but I must give myself time."

"It isn't that you are too selfish," said George gently, "but that you love fewer people than Helen does, and she is so happy now

that she cannot feel sorrow as keenly as you can."

She gave him a grateful look. "Uncle James told me the other day that I could scarcely take it harder if I had lost Helen. No one but you seems to understand. I suppose the knowledge that things might be a great deal worse ought to make it easier, but it does n't. And then there is the thought of what her mother and her husband must be feeling, and the thought of what I should feel if it were Helen! I know it is morbid in me. I suppose it is largely physical. But with all the pain, there is something in the fact of how we human beings can care for each other, that seems to glorify human nature, and make it worth while to live. Life has never seemed to me so beautiful as it has done in the last month. And I know as soon as I am rested I shall regain my old cheerfulness."

This proved a true prediction, and after a few weeks she took up her work with her former interest.

XXIII

It was June again, and those fields that had lately been bare and brown were flooded with green as by an incoming tide. The trees had so dense a shade that it was hard to remember they had lately been stripped of leaves, and even sorrowing human hearts had caught something of the season's joy. Jean's first keen grief was over. It was not that she loved Elsie less, or that she had forgotten her; on the contrary she felt her in all nature. Elsie had been so happy that every glad living thing — butterfly, bird, and beast of the field — reminded Jean of her cousin. She was learning a fact she had never once suspected, — that where one has loved truly there may be death, but there cannot be utter separation. This knowledge gave her courage for the future, and a key to much in life which she had never understood.

Alan had left Edgecomb a few weeks after his wife's death. It was stated now that he was going abroad for the summer. He came back to spend a few days with his mother-in-law

before his departure, and Mrs. Thorndyke praised him more warmly than ever.

"It was so good of him to come on to say good-by to me before going to Europe," she said to Jean one day, "when you think of all the painful associations he had to face; and although perhaps I should not say it, I am so like my poor dear child that he can't help but be reminded of her every time I open my lips. Darling Elsie! Well, he appreciated her! There never was a more devoted husband, as I tell him twenty times a day — always bringing her home flowers when he came from town, and giving her the rarest rings and jewels. 'Alan,' said I to-day, 'you have not one single thing to reproach yourself with; you were wholly wrapped up in my darling child, and you made her very happy; you were truly loved, if ever man was.' The gravestone is so simple and beautiful, just what Elsie would have liked, — 'Elsie, beloved wife of Alan Nichols,' carved into stone for all time, as if to symbolize the enduring quality of his love. 'Everybody realizes what you are suffering,' said I, 'even although you are not one to wear your heart on your sleeve;' and you would agree with me, Jean, if you could see the great pile of notes he's had. It is a comfort to me to know how every one appreciates my poor child. It is almost more satisfying than religion."

"It must be a great comfort," said Jean.

"Have you seen Alan? He is looking thin and worn, poor fellow, but he seems wonderfully calm and brave."

"No, I have n't seen him; he has been to the house twice, but I was out."

"I know he wants to see you to talk about darling Elsie. It is surprising to me always, — the calmness of men; they are so different from us poor women, for although it is six months since my child died, I cannot speak of her without tears, but I know how Alan is suffering inside, poor fellow. Well, I must run home to my poor boy. He will always seem like a son to me. 'Alan,' said I to-day, 'you know you can always have a home with me,' and he thanked me, but said he never wanted to live in Edgecomb again. I don't wonder he wants to get away from the scene of his greatest joy and his greatest sorrow."

That evening after tea Jean went down town to mail some letters, and in the post-office she met Alan. He was so grave and cold that he froze her. They shook hands formally, and she said, as if they had been the merest acquaintances, "I was sorry to miss you when you called, but grandfather enjoyed seeing you."

"I was sorry too," said Alan, beginning to thaw a little, "for I wanted so much to see you.

Have you a few minutes to spare now? Would you mind walking a short distance with me? It won't be dark for some time."

When they left the post-office he turned into a side street that took them almost immediately into the country.

"The world is painfully green just now," he said, as he glanced comprehensively over the landscape. "I always wish myself down on the cape in June, where I can get a rest from trees."

"Do you feel so? I take a mad sort of pleasure in the vividness and intensity of it all. It can never be too green or too sunny or too lavish for me. Elsie and I always felt the same about that. I have thought of her so many times this June," she added half shyly, lowering her voice.

He did not respond, and Jean, whose heart and mind were full of Elsie, felt repulsed.

Presently he looked up at the sun, that had set in a bank of angry clouds, and remarked that they were going to have a shower.

"Then I ought to go home."

"Not yet," he entreated. "It won't rain at present, and there is so much I want to say to you. I may not have another chance for months. You know I am going abroad next week?"

"Yes, I was glad to hear of it."

He grew animated in the discussion of his plans, but he suddenly paused as he saw a little

bent old woman, led by a child, approaching them. "There comes that bore of a Mrs. Thomas!" he exclaimed. "Do let 's cross over so she won't speak to us."

"We can't, for the little girl has told her who we are."

"Good evening, dear Miss Jean," said Mrs. Thomas effusively. "And it 's Mr. Nichols who is with you, Nannie tells me. Dear heart, dear heart! I 'm glad to see you, sir, to tell you how I loved your sweet wife." The tears came raining down the poor old creature's face at this point. "Many a time did she come to read to me, the pretty young thing, when she wanted to be off in the woods or on the hills, and her voice was always like music, and it seemed as if I could see her sweet young face, same as if I was n't blind. Nannie tells me the monument is fine. Sir, I can feel for you in your loneliness and sorrow."

"Thank you," he returned stiffly. "Jean, I think we shall have to be moving on, for it is getting late."

"I am coming to see you very soon, Mrs. Thomas," Jean said, trying to make up for her companion's coldness by a warm hand-clasp.

"I can't stand that woman," Alan said, as they walked on. "How could you be so polite to her?"

"I felt very sorry for her, and I was touched to think she cared so much for Elsie. She did n't mean to be impertinent. She thought it would be a comfort to you to know how even the humblest person felt about her. People are so different. Now I like to be sympathized with by any one who cared for Elsie."

"Jean, suppose you had put yourself in a false position, and were getting sympathy you did not deserve, how would you feel then?"

She was startled by his tone, and could not think of any reply to make.

"There have been times since I came down here when it has seemed as if I could not bear it," he went on vehemently. "I have felt it would be a relief to cry out from the housetops, 'Don't give me your pity! I was not as devoted to my wife as you think. I did not love her as I ought.' I have shocked you. I can't help it. I must speak to some one, or I shall go mad."

"You did love her," Jean said gently. "Perhaps not in the same way as at first, and you made her happy. You must not forget that."

"Don't, Jean. I can't bear it from you. I must tell the whole truth to you. It has been no new thing, but a long drawn-out agony, — my gradual discovery of our incompatibility. You will say I ought never to have married her, knowing as I did that she was so different from

my ideal. It is true; but I was carried away by her beauty and fascination; and her sunny temperament was a great attraction to my more sombre one. I did not realize that we can tire of too much sunshine. I did fight against my feeling, but when I accidentally found that she cared for me, I — well, I have been punished. Before we had been married a year, her divergences from the truth troubled me more and more, and I was unhappy because I found it impossible to make her take anything seriously. Her utter lack of interest in all my pursuits was another disappointment. I had flattered myself that she was so young I could make her over. I did not squarely face the fact of what it meant to me until I came home and had the companionship of true-hearted, noble-minded women who understood me, as you and Helen did. And then I, who had always believed in the absolute truth, found myself in a position where I had to act a part, or else be disloyal. I had fettered myself of my own free choice; poor Elsie was not to blame; and what does loyalty mean except bearing without open repining the burden we have voluntarily chosen?"

"Loyalty means more than that to me," said Jean in a low voice. "It means not allowing, even to one's self, that one cares less. It means loving straight on, in spite of faults and disappointments."

"I can't do that. I have to analyze my feelings and face the consequences. I had ceased to love Elsie as I loved her once, and so I felt all the more bound to make her as happy as I could in external ways. And who was I, to quarrel with her lack of truth, when I was in so false a position myself? God help me! Living has not been easy work the last few years."

"It must have been hard," said Jean compassionately.

"To live a life that is in part a deceit; to be praised where one should be censured, and blamed where one deserves pity, is not easy. Well, it is over now, but what can never be lived down is the knowledge of my failure, the feeling that I have been a traitor to all my principles, the overwhelming sense of defeat. To love truth as I loved it, and then to be so placed that one must be false to one's promises or untrue to one's self, is hard. I chose what seemed to me the lesser evil, but good God! I have been punished! That last scene with her after you went out of the door — I would not live it over again for ten years of my life. I could not lie, at that solemn moment, when she felt that she was asking for an expression of my affection for the last time, and still less could I tell the truth. Of course I said I loved her; but when she asked if I loved her as well as in

the old days, as well as she loved me, what could I say? I told her we could not measure affection, and that she must be content."

The angry clouds in the west were growing darker, and a few raindrops began to fall, but they were unheeded.

"I cannot understand your not always loving her, when you had loved her once," said Jean, "for she was such a little dear."

"When you get over an infatuation, the old charm no longer exists for you. In fact, it sometimes irritates you like a poor copy of a beautiful painting. I did try my hardest to do my duty, and if I failed — if I had had any idea she was not going to get well, I could have done so much more for her, poor little thing. I reproach myself bitterly now, but I fancied she was one of those nervous invalids who live for years, demanding constant sacrifices, and I thought I ought to make a stand in the beginning. Poor child! I could never see why she loved me, but she was one of those women who like to be ruled with a strong hand. I suppose you think me a hypocrite to say all this to you, and yet to have put those words on her tombstone?"

"No, I do not think you a hypocrite."

"I could not refuse her that. I had so little to give, that I felt I must make up to her in all

the ways I could, and it was true that I had loved her once. But it accentuates the ghastly contrast between my outward life as known to men and my inner life as known to myself. What a woman you are! You are so sympathetic that I find myself telling you things I could not breathe to any other human being! Well, it is a relief to have spoken, for I could not bear to have you, of all people, think better of me than I deserve. Do you remember my once asking you if you did not feel sorry for me, as well as for Elsie, and you would not say it? You were right. I knew it as soon as you had spoken. If you had been a different sort of woman — if you had given me pity — well, it might have been much harder for Elsie and me than it was. But now there can be no harm in saying it. Do you feel sorry for me now?"

A sudden mist had come into Jean's eyes, and her voice failed her.

"I am sorry for Elsie," she said, as soon as she could speak. "It is the thought of the emptiness there must have been in her life that is unnerving me now."

"But she did not know it. It was not as hard for her as for me."

"She could not have helped feeling there was a difference. Poor Elsie, poor dear little Elsie, I never loved her half enough."

"But surely you were clear-sighted enough to have suspected this? I always fancied you understood."

"I did in part, but I thought you loved her, underneath; that you would realize how much you cared, when it was too late."

It was raining fast now, and the vivid green was dimmed as with a blur of tears. They turned and began to walk back towards the town.

"Jean, have you no word of pity for me?" Alan asked in a low tone.

"I am very sorry for you, but you have a man's work in the world, and perhaps this wrong start will make you all the stronger. It will give you more charity for human frailty."

"How much charity have you for human frailty?" he demanded. "I wish you were n't so strong and so high-minded, and you would know without my telling you in words — don't you see? Can't you understand? Will you let me go away without a word of hope?"

The color rushed into her face in a vivid flame, and then left her paler than it found her.

"I can see that I have shocked you. I did n't intend to say this. I only meant to ask you if you would not write to me while I am gone."

"You have made that impossible."

"Why? Do you mean that you cannot for-

give me for what seems to you my disloyalty to Elsie? I could not help caring for her less; those things are beyond our control, and lately, since I have been away from you, I could not help missing you unspeakably, and realizing — what you are to me."

"Please don't," she entreated.

"You have made it impossible for me to speak any more explicitly to you now," he said slowly, "but won't you promise not to judge me too severely? Do not punish me for my frankness. Will you not let me have the hope that some time, in months or years" —

"No," she broke in, "that would make no difference. I should have the same answer to give if you waited for years."

"Jean, why do you feel so? I wish you would tell me the whole truth."

She was silent. It was impossible for her to say to this man, who thought he loved the absolute truth, that the strong feeling she might once have had for him was gone, past recall, and that it had been killed by his own acts.

"Is it because you cannot forgive what seems to you so wrong? Think how I have suffered, and how hard I have tried to do right."

She was overwhelmed by a feeling that amounted almost to repulsion for the man at her side, and which swept away the pity she had

felt for him in the beginning of their interview. She tried to reason her aversion away, and to say to herself that this shock was out of all proportion to the cause. She tried to remember that the six months since his wife's death, so short a time to her, were like half a lifetime to him. And yet, in spite of all her efforts, the fact remained that his words had put the finishing touch to her last illusions.

"Can't you give me one word of hope?" Alan pleaded.

"No. Not in the way you mean. I am sorry, so sorry you told me this, because — and yet I do want to be friends."

After this they walked back in silence through the rain, that came down in a drenching pour, and then ceased almost as suddenly as it had begun.

When they reached the post-office, Jean stopped.

"Please don't walk back with me," she begged. "I can go with my neighbors as soon as the mail is open. I would rather say good-by now."

Something in the stiffness of Alan's manner made her sure that the loss of illusions was not confined to her. She was conscious that she seemed coldly conventional to him, and lacking in sympathy. She knew how deeply he must

already be regretting the impulse that had led him to lay bare his inmost soul to her, and with a swift revulsion of feeling she was able for a moment to put aside the thought of herself, and to have an unwilling admiration for one side of his character. Cold and selfish as he had shown himself to Elsie, it was true that he had tried hard to do what he thought was right, poor fellow, and she knew she ought to feel far more sorry for him than she could. Suddenly another face came before her, and she realized that had George Morley thrown himself upon her mercy, she could have forgiven him worse sins.

"Good-by," she said. "I shall always be interested in what you do, and you have the promise of a great career. I am glad of that."

He bowed frigidly, very much as he had bowed to Mrs. Thomas, and she felt that she had forfeited his friendship forever. As she watched his retreating figure, she wondered why she could see it without one spark of that emotion it had always aroused in her when she was a girl, and why the pity she felt for him was not the warm feeling that flooded her heart at the thought of Elsie. And then she gave a fervent exclamation of gratitude that this chance had not come to her five years earlier, when she might have given a different answer.

His manner in parting from her made her sure that she could not have long continued to come up to his exacting standard. What a horrible fate hers would have been in that case! She would have suffered far more than Elsie, because of her greater keenness of vision. She could imagine the gradual loss of one illusion after another, the agonizing suspense when she first began to suspect that her husband no longer cared for her in the old way, the loss of the keenness of her own love, and finally the dull acceptance of life without its savor. She could fancy her cramped existence, with the power of work finally crushed out of her, and Alan's disappointment when he found that she was so changed that the reasons why he had loved her once no longer existed. And then, with a rush of emotion, she thought of George. How sympathetic he was! How full of affection and pity! Whatever his sins might be, one would always feel sure of his sincere remorse and warm human love. She half tremulously acknowledged to herself that the time would come some day when she would reward him for his long constancy and tried affection. For herself she would be content to go on as they were, but this was demanding too much of him, and the last few months had taught her that she could not give up his friendship.

She was still thinking of George as she left the post-office and went into the dark street. She realized for the first time how cold and wet she was, and how exhausted mentally and physically.

Virginia Morley met her as she came out of the post-office. There was something in her set face that gave Jean a sense of coming misfortune.

"Jean, you have n't seen anything of George, have you?" she asked breathlessly.

"No; why? What do you mean?"

Virginia gripped Jean's hand as if in a vise. "Oh, my dear! such a terrible thing has happened! I was anxious about George, because he did n't come home to dinner, and so I telephoned to the factory, to see if he were there, and there has been a horrible explosion. A great many of the workmen were killed. They thought George had left the building before it took place, and that he was at home, but it is possible that — that — I cannot say it; it is too terrible!"

Jean had turned very white, but she did not speak.

"Oh, good heavens!" Virginia exclaimed, "what a thing it is to have a calm temperament! Why don't you say something? I believe I shall go mad if I can't get any news

soon. Speak to me! Say something! Say that you are sorry for me!"

"I am very sorry for you," said Jean in a voice that was not her own.

"I am going to take the train," Virginia proceeded excitedly. "I can go to the factory myself, — I don't care who tries to keep me away, — and I can find out the truth. I cannot bear it if anything has happened to him. He may be living, but injured, and there will be no one to take care of him. How can you look so cool and quiet? One would think George was not even an acquaintance! Good God! If I had read of such an accident in the papers and did not know one of the men by name, it would unnerve me for the whole evening."

Jean had turned to walk toward the station with Virginia. As they went past an electric light, the two looked at each other. Jean's face seemed turned to stone.

"If such a thing had happened and there were any chance that you had been injured, George would have been simply wild with anxiety. I can't understand cold people. I could never see how you could help loving my brother. He is the dearest fellow that ever lived, and to think that perhaps — Will you come to the factory with me, Jean?"

"Yes, but there is no train for three quarters

of an hour," she said as she looked at her watch.

"How can you keep the trains in your head at such a time! I should like to walk there. I cannot keep still, I" —

"You had better come home with me and wait for the next train," suggested Jean.

"How calm and sensible you are, and yet you are not generally as practical as I am. Oh, my God, what shall I do if he is dead? What shall I do? And you, for whom he cares more than for his life, can go on as if it were a matter of indifference to you whether he is living or dead!"

"Don't, Virginia, I cannot bear it."

Jean was learning many things. Was it only five minutes since she had said to herself that perhaps she might reward George in time? Or was it ages ago when she was a selfish, self-absorbed woman, careless of the deeper facts of life, blind to her own nature? She had never once thought of the possibility of so horrible a punishment. She said to herself miserably that it would be a fate in accordance with her character. But it did seem as if the punishment would be out of all proportion to the sin! What was the grief she had felt for Elsie? Only a pale shadow. Why had she been so blind? How could she have gone on for weeks

and months without suspecting the strength of her feelings? And then she recollected with a rush of joy that there was no certainty of disaster. George might be waiting for them at the next street corner. Oh, if she could only see him!

"Jean," said Virginia, "if you cannot bear to have me call you cold, you must care for George. Tell me that you love him too. I can bear it better. Oh, there is no one like him."

Jean pressed her friend's hand.

"You do care?" Virginia cried.

"Yes, I care."

"You love him? If he is alive you love him well enough to marry him?"

"Yes."

"Jean, I can't understand you. You evidently do love him, and yet all you can say is 'Yes.' And you have never given him a word of hope. But I suppose if he were to die it would almost kill you, for you felt so desperately about Elsie. I am thankful that I know how much people are to me when they are alive."

"You may well be thankful."

After this they walked on in silence.

When they reached the parsonage Jean said, "I shall have to change my gown, for it is

soaked with rain. If you will go into the parlor I will come down directly."

As she turned to go upstairs, she heard a cry from Virginia. For a moment Jean's heart stood still.

"George, oh, George!" gasped his sister. "My dear! and Jean and I thought you were dead."

When Jean reached the door, she saw George and her grandfather, with the chessboard between them. Virginia had rushed up to her brother and flung her arms about his neck. He was looking up at her with a sort of amused surprise. Jean's grandfather was groping on the floor for a castle and a knight that had been rudely sent there by their impetuous visitor.

"George," he said mildly, looking at Virginia with a reproachful glance, "I am afraid this young lady has demolished our game. Do you remember where the castle was? I think the knight was on this square. I was just going to checkmate you, and I have n't done it for weeks."

"Oh, my dear, my dear," Virginia reiterated, "we thought you were dead."

"Why? I certainly never felt more alive."

"There has been an explosion at the factory, and some men were killed. Oh, never mind

them! Don't look so horrified. It is bad enough, but I can't think about the others as long as you escaped. Don't rush off to the factory this minute. Jean and I want to have one look at you first. You don't understand that we thought you were killed. She 's the sort of woman who likes her friends better when they are dead, and even you would have been pleased at the kind of feeling she showed for you."

He looked at Jean with an expression that made his face radiant, then it changed to one of wistful doubt. "Can this wonderful thing be true?" he seemed to ask.

Jean was standing very still and pale in the doorway.

George went over to her and held out his hand. She took it, and as she did so she trembled.

He looked at her again with that expression of wistful doubt; but as she raised her eyes to his, the look changed to one of overwhelming joy, and Jean knew that all doubt and grief, all coldness and solitude, were over.

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, U. S. A.
ELECTROTYPED AND PRINTED BY
H. O. HOUGHTON AND CO.

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